

Rise of the Rider

by AFCJ

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Fantasy

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2012-11-21 22:40:51

Updated: 2014-11-30 07:43:34

Packaged: 2016-04-26 14:05:43

Rating: T

Chapters: 17

Words: 118,735

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Dragon Training has been postponed until Stoick's return from Helheim's Gate. During his father's month-long voyage, Hiccup forges a friendship with a creature he was raised to despise. Now, he must convince the other trainees that dragons aren't by their nature ferocious, and that there's a much larger problem that can only be stopped with cooperation between mortal enemies.

1. Another Morning in the Cove

****A:N**** _Welcome! This is my first story, a retelling of the film _How to Train Your Dragon._ I hope you enjoy it._

I don't know if I'll ever be done fixing it.

* * *

><p>My name is Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, and this is my journal. I know, it seems strange for a 'slash first, ask questions never' Viking to write his thoughts out and carry them with him, but I'm no ordinary Viking. In fact, other than being the son of the village Chief, I'm not really a Viking at all. I can't lift a hammer, I can't swing an axe, and the first time I ever tried to actually do something as the apprentice of Gobber the Belch, our local Blacksmith, I managed to cut off his right foot. Luckily for me, a dragon had already done that to him years prior, so he just attached a spare peg and smacked me upside the head.<p>

So, I'm not much of a Viking. And since I'm barely a Viking, I don't feel weird keeping a journal. In fact, I'm kinda surprised I didn't do this earlier, but I guess it has to do with my fear of being considered weird. I mean, I am weird. I'm really weird. Anyone on Berk will tell you that. But, I've embraced it a little, or at least enough to carry a notebook around with me. It's become one of my most useful tools, too. Other than loving to draw, and being able to do it anywhere, I have far too many ideas floating around in my head to keep track of them all. So here I am, writing them down as I walk

through the forests of Berk. My house may be empty, what with my father gone on yet another expedition to find the dragon's nest and all, but I prefer being outside. When I'm at home, people tend to know. When I'm lost in the forest they secretly hope I don't come back out, but at least they leave me alone.

Speaking of dragon expeditions, this one was supposed to be a big one; the last major attempt during Berk's 'warm' season to break through Helheim's Gate, find the dragons' nest and take it, so we could finally be rid of them. However, most of the village decided they'd rather use the least-cold portion of the year to prepare for the rest of it, rather than chasing after a cloud-masked island no one's ever seen.

Gobber, my father's closest friend and confidant, was among those with no interest in another expedition. He somehow managed to convince my dad to use a single scouting ship to find a decent path through the fog before sending an entire fleet. It probably had something to do with how many boats we'd already lost to Helheim's Gate as well as how many provisions we had, despite the dragon raids. Really, though, I think Gobber's just sick of building new boats.

Either way, my father's departure just meant that I had more time to myself, which was nice. An even better turn of events was the weather: the skies were almost cloudless and there was actually a nice breeze blowing over the island. It was the end of spring, and even though the concept of seasons never really applied to Berk, it was still a lovely day for anyone used to living in an arctic wasteland. The dawn air was clear and crisp, and while there was always the chance for the weather to turn horrible in a moment, I had a feeling today would be a good one.

I only returned to the village from where I'd been staying to change into some clean clothes and grab a basket of fish from the docks when I was sure no one was looking. After that, I headed back into the forest toward my own private hiding spot from the village: Toothless Cove.

It isn't on any maps of the island, and no one's ever bothered going to the part of the forest it sits in. Of course, I'm grateful for it; it's hard not to be grateful when it's a perfect place to avoid random glares, taunts and sometimes (all the time when Snotlout is involved) physical violence. I may be the Stoick the Vast's son, but that doesn't stop me from being the butt of everyone's jokes or being beaten on for being little. 'It'll toughen the little runt up' they say. It's not like it could be causing any deep-rooted emotional problems that I cover up with sarcasm and dry wit. No, that couldn't possibly be a side effect at all.

As I trekked deeper into the forest, I kept a lookout to make sure no one was following me. I'd wandered these woods for years, so losing someone that might be interested in my business had never been a problem. Not that anyone ever would, but still. What I'm doing now could get me in more trouble than all of my failed dragon-slaying siege engines combined. I'd really hate to see how everything would turn out for me if anyone ever discovered who I'm hiding here. It wouldn't be pretty, considering his kind and mine are at war.

Our island, like many in the area, has pest problems. Very big,

angry, dragon-sized pest problems. Being that we're a tribe of fatheaded Vikings, we opted to declare war on the beasts rather than move somewhere a little less inhospitable. I'd frequently questioned this stubbornness as a child, and it was always met with the same response: 'We're Vikings. It's an occupational hazard.' We were too pigheaded to leave, and the dragons obviously weren't going anywhere, so we fought with them over our resources. Even with all of the damage they'd caused and everything they'd ever stolen from us, I no longer wanted to fight them(not that I ever could to begin with). My village, on the other hand, was still quite alright with continuing a three-hundred year old war. I knew I had to try and stop it, considering all of the recent changes to my life, but something that long-standing would be almost impossible to put and end to for someone my age, even with the help I had.

As for why I no longer wanted to fight the dragons? Simple, really: the best friend I'd ever had in the fifteen years I'd spent on this island and only resident of Toothless Cove didn't much like to fight, either. He convinced me that dragons aren't the evil, heartless monsters we'd painted them as, and being with him had also proven to me that there's a way out of this mess for the both of us.

Even so, it's not like I could very easily explain away the fact that I've been hiding a dragon from the village, so I've been watching my back and making sure to enter the Cove from different ends of the forest from day to day. That way, I wouldn't leave a clear path for someone else to follow. I'd also make sure to hide if I noticed suspicious movement or sounds nearby, and today was no different. Walking and writing at the same time tends to dull the senses, but the telltale 'thunk' of an axe head hitting a tree snapped me out of my trance. I hid from the source of the sound and quickly put my journal away in my vest. Training with her axe off in the distance, not one hundred feet from me, was Astrid.

Beautiful, wonderful Astrid.

She ripped the axe from its place in a large oak tree and hurled it as hard as she could at another one. As I watched her maim tree after tree, part of me thought I should say something to her, especially considering the axe flying around. I decided against it since I was pretty sure she hated me, and that combined with the axe was admittedly intimidating. The last thing I needed on such a beautiful day was a weapon flying at my head, so I remained silent, looking at her intensely from behind my tree. Her face was dripping with sweat, her brow furrowed in concentration. It was a look I'd seen on her a lot, but something else about it bothered me. Astrid wasn't the kind of warrior that had any difficulty mastering her weaponry, but at the moment she clearly looked more frustrated than concentrated.

Her technique wasn't getting any sloppier, but she seemed to be getting angrier with each throw. I wondered again if I should make my presence known and say something to try and cheer her up, even if it would only end with me being hit and then yelled at.

I'd probably be called a fool for it, but even though Astrid had hated me since we were children I still enjoyed seeing her happy, which admittedly was pretty rare these days. All she ever seemed to do for the past few years was ready herself for our upcoming Dragon Training classes, and it seemed to be getting to her. At least she had more time to prepare for it, thanks to me.

Dragon Training was originally slated to start on the same day as the latest voyage to the barrier of fog that surrounds Dragon Island. My father had planned on having Gobber train the village's new recruits in the Dragon kill ring while some of our best warriors accompanied their Chief to Helheim's Gate. Despite knowing firsthand that most of these convoys never come back('It's an occupational hazard' echoing through my mind) he was still determined to find the nest, and that part of his plan wouldn't change no matter what number of boats he used.

The Dragon Training part of the plan did change, however, since Gobber managed to convince my father of one more thing. Alongside the other teenagers, I was to take part in learning how to kill a dragon, and my father insisted he wanted to keep an eye on me while I did it. As such, training would begin when he returned, meaning my life would only remain calm and quiet for a little while longer.

Pushing my thoughts from my head, I eventually pried my wanting eyes away from the passion with which Astrid was perfecting her technique. I silently made my way toward my real destination, making sure to focus on the rhythmic sounds of her axe as they slowly faded into the background. Within a few minutes the forest was quiet again, leaving me awash in the sounds of nature as I reached the bottom of Toothless Cove, fish basket in tow. I opened and upended it, dumping its slimy contents in a slightly nauseating pile in front of me. I stepped back from the pile and made to call for the dragon I was trying to feed when I was lightly pounced to the ground from behind.

A happy purr and the sight of big, scaly legs on either side of my head were proof enough that he already knew I was coming. But then again, with his pristine hearing and sense of smell, I had a feeling he knew exactly where I was. Toothless is a dragon, after all; the same dragon I shot down during the last raid we had; the same dragon I could've killed, but didn't; the same dragon that could have killed ME, but didn't; and the same dragon who, against all conventional wisdom, let a Viking get close enough to him to call him a friend.

When this strange 'relationship' of ours started, we were distant and understandably cautious around one another. He'd watch me from afar, but when I'd try to get closer to him he'd push me away, leave, or ignore me outright. With enough time we finally broke through each other's defenses and managed to forge a small bond. Over the last month that bond has grown into a inescapable chain that I would do anything to keep from breaking.

"Hey, good morning there, bud," I said, my face turned down to the ground. "I hope you slept well. If you haven't noticed," I gestured forward with my left hand, the only limb I had that hadn't been pinned to the ground, "I only left to bring you breakfast. And I'd really appreciate it if you'd get off of me before you start eating it because I can't feel my legs."

Toothless let out what I've come to accept as laughter as he leapt off of me gracefully, allowing me to stand back up while he began to eat. I pulled my journal out of my vest to take some notes on his body, but only after I jotted down some things I noticed about Astrid from earlier(her ongoing frustration, the deteriorating quality of her axe, her perfect form when she throws her weapon, how her bangs

always seemed to get in the way of her eyes when she's training, how her eyes were that striking shade of blue you could lose yourself in, the soft curve of her face, how... How I should probably scratch this out, or at least stop writing it). Hoping once again that no one else ever had a chance to read what I'd been writing, I pushed the whole thing from my head as best I could and started making more notes on Toothless.

His graceful, muscular body and extremely powerful wings could carry the weight of myself and probably one other, but too much excess weight would begin to drop his speed and maneuverability considerably. The fire-proof black scales he constantly re-grew could prove useful if I ever figured out how to make a tunic out of them. His extremely emotive, yellow-green, catlike eyes were one of his most interesting features. The range of emotion they could reveal was strikingly human, and more often than not I could tell exactly what Toothless's mood was by looking at his face. Moving my gaze from his head down his body, I felt a pang of guilt surge through me as I looked upon the rigging I'd designed for his tail. It was in place of one of the tailfins he was missing, and without the artificial wing and a rider to position it properly, Toothless had no chance of flying. The rope and pulley system I had to position the wing worked, but it was sluggish to respond and could lock up if we were flying too fast, so it needed a redesign to function properly. But if not for me and the weapons I'd designed while tutoring under Gobber, he wouldn't be missing the original one at all.

My father's had me in the forge since I was old enough to lift a craftsman's hammer, mostly as a way of leaving me out of harm's way. He also said it would keep me from causing trouble and give me something to do for the village that was actually useful. Someone as scrawny and useless as I am in battle would never manage to kill a dragon by himself, so I improvised with whatever I could think of. Nearly everything I'd ever built was a failure, though, and all of my shortcomings had earned me the title "Hiccup the Useless" among my peers.

But all of that was the past, and those dragon-killing contraptions I used to build no longer exist. I scrapped them all after I realized I'd used one of them to badly injure my only friend. It felt incredibly ironic that I would have no friends at all if I hadn't done what I did, but that couldn't excuse what I did to him. I was just glad he never thought to hold it against me.

With a sigh I finished sketching out the updated version of the saddle Toothless was wearing and put my journal away again. I made my way over to the dragon and placed my hand on his side, rubbing it lightly. Toothless crooned at this, pushing himself against me in response.

"Feels good, doesn't it? The new saddle should stop all of the rubbing and wearing, and I'm sorry it still isn't done yet. Still, you wouldn't need it at all without me..." He stared at me for a moment before butting his nose against my stomach. His purring felt comforting, and with it came a sense of ease. Even if he understood what I'd done, he clearly didn't seem to care.

"Thanks, Toothless." I dusted myself off, watching as the 'ferocious' Night Fury eyeballed and then pounced on the cache of fish I'd brought him. He played with a few of the fish, but before long had

begun to eat. After several minutes of loud, sloppy gorging, Toothless belched appreciatively towards me and then plopped to the ground.

Blowing the smell of saltwater, fish and dragon breath out of my face, I lied down with my head against his scaly side. He started a small fire near us with a puff and pushed a fish to me he hadn't eaten. I was about to claim I wasn't hungry, but Toothless already seemed insistent that I eat it. Picking it up by the tail, he dropped the fish in my lap and then began lightly growling at me. Before I knew it, the herring was skewered and roasting over our little fire pit. Apparently feeling satisfied by this, Toothless' growling stopped and he lied his head down next to me. As his attention drifted to the crackling fire, his expression changed once again to a look of content.

It wasn't just Toothless that could express himself, either. The Terrible Terrors, tiny dragons that came in a rainbow of colors and acted very much like cats, if cats could fly and breathe fire, also wore their moods on their faces. However, they're not terribly smart; arguably the least aware of the dragons near Berk. Still, they seemed smart enough to understand basic emotions, which made me wonder what the bigger dragons I'd never had a chance to get to know were really like.

We sat there for a while, not really doing much. I'd already told him about the raid, the night I shot him down, how I was usually treated in the village because of my attempts to help. There was very little I hadn't talked about in the long weeks I'd known him, from ideas and inventions to previous friends and family - I even told him about the night my mother died.

"Sometimes... Sometimes I wonder exactly when it happened. When I and the rest of the kids my age were all toddlers, we were all really friendly with one another. I don't remember much from those days, but a few things do stick out in my head: learning to read the Dragon Manual with Fishlegs, successfully keeping the twins from ripping each other apart even when their own parents couldn't, actually getting along with my older cousin Snotlout, and of course, spending time with Astrid."

I stared at my fish for a moment before taking a bite of it. The taste took a backseat to my mind constantly coming back to Astrid. Thinking about her left me with an awkward, empty feeling in my chest, like the dull throbbing pain that comes along with a sleeping limb. For the longest time I couldn't find anything that would help with the feeling until the first day Toothless and I successfully took flight. But even then, the thoughts of her would sometimes get through.

"Her mother and mine were both Shieldmaidens. They also happened to be childhood friends, which ultimately meant that no matter what kind of kids they'd have, the two would be very close. Sometimes they even joked about having them married if the two were boy and girl, a point my mom liked to bring up around me whenever she noticed I wasn't feeling very happy. Looking back, the reason she always told me that was because she knew how I felt about Astrid before I did." Toothless continued to stare at me, a small smile curling at the edges of his mouth.

"It's true; even back then I was in love with her. I never told anyone, though; I figured it'd ruin my relationship with her if she found out. Besides, the other kids already picked on me enough, me being their scrawny punching bag and all. Even with the teasing I was still invited to do things with them, which gave me the chance to play with Astrid. She never picked on me, probably because I could make her laugh." I nonchalantly looked into the sky as I continued.

"We were young when I had my first real memory of her, even if there wasn't much to it. I was five or six, maybe less. She'd just laughed really hard at something I'd said. I was so focused on that sound that I didn't notice the small pond I was about to stumble into, which was unfortunate because that water was really cold." Toothless laughed again at my expense, purring a bit before quieting down quickly so I could continue.

"Yeah, real funny. Astrid thought it was, too. And despite how cold I was, I couldn't help but laugh with her, because it felt like the natural thing to do." I stopped for a moment to chew on my slowly charring fish. "I have a few good memories with her, but that one stands out in my mind. Not that I don't appreciate them all." The nostalgic grin that had etched its way onto my face slowly faded, as did Toothless's smile and vocalizations.

"Because sometimes that's all you have left of a person." I threw the remainder of the fish into the fire, having eaten my fill.

"I told you once... Back when I was eight, my mother was killed during a raid. I remember her being a gentle and caring, but very tough woman. I also remember hearing it took four dragons at once to finally take her down, though I never saw it myself. And while I never imagined things could get worse after that, they did." I watched the fire crackle as I drew my knees up to my chest. The past was a strange thing to think about, especially those points that hurt to remember. I heard Toothless crooning at me while I stared through the dancing flames, and it was enough to pull me from the trance I'd gotten myself into.

"It's okay, bud. Really. I may be an outcast hiding in plain sight, but I have you. And that's all that matters to me now. Really, it's almost funny how a creature I was taught could feel nothing but blind rage shows me more love and compassion than I've been given since I was a child." Toothless' tail wrapped around me as he blasted the fire pit again, giving us some more warmth. It was only then I realized I was shivering, and as much as I hated to admit it, lightly crying. It was the worst part about remembering my mother, how awful even the good memories could make me feel. But with Toothless around, that feeling had been fading more and more every day.

"It all really did start after my mother died. Everyone was in shock, but instead of grieving it seemed to have thrown everyone's motivations into overdrive. Fishlegs started reading into everything about killing dragons, spending whatever time he had away from the books with a war hammer in his hand. The twins went from roughhousing to even more violent roughhousing, which was about the best I'd expect from them. Snotout started training with his dad every day. Astrid, well, she'd always practiced with her axe, but the death of her surrogate aunt seemed to enrage her. She threw everything she had into learning how to fight, outpacing the other kids in the process.

I was the only one who couldn't do anything to help." Toothless began growling as he was earlier when those words left my mouth. He never did like hearing me talk down about myself.

"Sorry, bud, but in a way it's true. Most of my contraptions backfired and wound up hurting someone or damaging buildings. Of course, no one really gave me a hard time about it at first, but over time I was condemned from building any more siege engines. Granted, that didn't exactly stop me since no one outside of my father and Gobber ever bothered to watch what I was doing, and even those two never found out." I kept staring at the sky while I figured out what I wanted to tell him next. Inevitably, my mind began wandering until it returned again to Astrid.

"The night my mom died, Astrid was the first person to find me. Gobber had run out when he'd heard my father screaming bloody rage, and from what I gather he didn't even notice me pass out when I heard him. I came to with Astrid leaning over me, shaking me awake. She consoled me, of course; they all did. But over time my weaknesses pushed them all away, her included." I sat in relative silence save for the sound of Toothless vibrating as I regrouped my thoughts.

"She told me... She told me a few days ago, that she hated me. Absolutely and unconditionally despised me. I can't even begin to tell you what that did to me. The only reason I can bear it is because I'm not entirely alone." I scratched Toothless' head and he nuzzled me some more. "Her timing was perfect, too. She said that to me on the anniversary of my mother's death. I wonder if she even realizes it, since I didn't bother telling her; it'd only upset her even more." Toothless glared at me, and I knew why. I was always too nice, at least to her.

"Look, I get that I need to stand up for myself some more, but that battle isn't really one I can win. Besides, at this point I'd rather focus on the better aspects of my life. For instance, my best friend is a dragon." Toothless smiled again, his purring jumping all around in volume and pitch.

"I doubt my mother would want me dwelling on the past, anyway. Hel, if she knew what I was doing with you... I think she might even be proud of me, in a way. Shooting down a dragon, and then befriending it instead of killing it? And flying with him, on top of that!" I stood up and stretched, pulling in a yawn in the process. "Speaking of which, Toothless, do you want to get into the air? It's a beautiful day and I figured we could try freefalling again, probably after checking to see if my dad's scouting boat is on its way back from Helheim's Gate." I made my way over to a curved wall of the cove, close to where our fire was. Nestled in the stone wall was a cave that was just big enough to act as a den for supplies as well as a place to sleep for Toothless and myself. It was also where I'd been sleeping since my dad left for Helheim's Gate. My riding vest and Toothless's saddle were right in the place I always stored them, and after pulling them out I made my way back to Toothless.

"You know, I'm really going to miss sleeping out here with you at night, bud. It's more comfortable sleeping in the cove than back home, but I know how my father gets when I'm out past sundown. It hasn't been much of an issue with him being gone," I said, buckling the saddle into place over the tailfin mechanism, "but when he gets

back, I'll have to head home. I guess, with you hiding here now, we should consider ourselves lucky no one else seems to notice my absence, let alone care."

"_Then you shouldn't care, either_." Either my mind was playing tricks on me or Toothless Cove was actually haunted, since what I heard was clearly someone's voice. It sounded not unlike my father's, booming and strong, but with a certain tenderness to it. I quickly looked around for another person, but it was obvious that Toothless and I were the only ones in the cove.

"Well, that was... Interesting. Hearing random voices usually isn't a good sign, but I did have some trouble sleeping last night... Maybe I'm just hearing things. A nice, long flight should take my mind off of it." Toothless smiled at me and nodded before beckoning to the skies. With a smile myself, I hopped into the saddle and we were off like lightning.

2. Lightning and Death, Leather and Steel

You would think that flying hundreds of feet in the air on the back of the world's fastest dragon would make writing in a journal nearly impossible, and you'd be right. Luckily for me I'm resourceful, so during one of my secret nightly visits to the smithy, I attached a series of clips to the saddle to hold my journal in place. I also had my charcoal pencil connected to the spine of the book with a bit of twine.

Even so, I could really only write in the saddle when cruising along at a mild pace, which we hadn't exactly come up here to do. I learned the hard way to not bother even opening the book at speed, since the clips couldn't stop that much wind blowing over the pages. The last thing I'd want is another 'cheat sheet' incident, though I'm confident now I could easily catch my journal before it got anywhere near the ocean. Not to mention we'd been doing freefalls for over a week now, so if it ever accidentally happened again, we could just go with it.

Taking in a deep breath of crisp air, I stretched up and looked at the sky, then back down at the rocky shores of Berk. When I'm down on the ground, I'm clumsy, I stumble a lot, and I tend to drop things. I wasn't much better in the air at first, but a month or so of working at it over and over again had honed my skill to a razor's edge.

Toothless and I could operate almost perfectly in sync with one another, to the point where his missing tailfin wasn't even that noticeable, mechanical problems notwithstanding. With a flick of my ankle we blasted straight upwards, careening past the tip of the mountain of Berk. We kept going until the entire island was just a small spot in a truly massive ocean of water.

Until I'd met Toothless, I had absolutely no idea just how big the world really was, and how much smaller I was in comparison. How small everyone was, actually, Viking or not. My clan seemed to act like they were invincible, capable of leveling forests, crushing mountains, taming seas (One of many statements my father was known for).

Yet, if we were so capable of taming the seas, I wondered why no one ever considered trying to tame a dragon until I came along? Then again, I wouldn't exactly say I 'tamed' Toothless. Rather, he and I bonded and continue to learn more and more about one another. If I'm taming him, then he's taming me just as well. It still makes me wonder, though, why no one had ever considered it. Then again, this is Berk, and Vikings tend not to think about anything other than fighting, and from time to time, food.

Looking far to the west, I could just barely see the mists that shrouded the dragon's island. Toothless hated getting anywhere near the place, and to be honest, I couldn't really blame him. The Gate echoed with the sounds of a choir of banshees, their shrieks blending together to form a continuous stream. It was haunting to hear, sounding as much like a terrified call it did unintelligible noise. It was hard to describe, like I was hearing something through the wailing, but it was too faint to pick up on.

That wasn't the only thing, though; there's something else hiding on that island. Something making a deep, rumbling growl that I could feel in my bones. It was terrifying; worse than the shrieking banshees, but similar in that there was something else hidden within. It wasn't a sound so much as a feeling of dread, hitting like a freezing gust. I wondered how my father and his men could even stand it, being so close to the source.

I wasn't not sure why, but I had a feeling that deep sound was the key to all of our problems. Even with that knowledge, though, I knew we weren't ready to face whatever was hiding in that mist. I didn't think anyone, Viking or not, was ready for it.

I had Toothless fly as close to Helheim's Gate as either of us could handle while we looked for the ship. It was part of a routine at this point, looking for my father's scouting ship. We'd make our way out to the Gate every morning for a better idea of the time we had left. Once the ship reappeared, I'd have about two days to spend with Toothless before I'd be back in my own bed at night, and probably only one day left after that before my first day of dragon training.

I couldn't say I was all too excited about learning how to kill dragons; It all just seemed so wrong after meeting Toothless. They didn't exactly deserve the way we'd treat them, but we still had to defend ourselves when they came calling for our food. The fact that they'd always steal so much of it compared to what we fed the dragons in the kill ring didn't add up, either. I mentioned this to Toothless once and he responded by flattening his ears down and shaking his head back and forth. Whatever the dragons were doing with their scores was something he didn't want me thinking about.

The spit from Helheim's Gate was slowly beginning to dampen my clothes while we searched for the ship. Or rather, while Toothless searched; my time was spent focusing on steering us, considering how much better his eyesight was than mine. I did still take a couple of close looks for the ship, if only to distract me from the sound.

"Well, Toothless, do you see anything?" I shouted over the winds whipping past my face. Toothless shook his head and let out a noise that I assume meant 'no,' considering how much of the Gate we had

past. I grinned a little, knowing we would have some extra time to spend in the air together. I'd been clinging to these moments, these memories, because I felt that even with my dad in the ring with me, I was still going to die somehow. I'd really hope not, if only because Toothless would be flightless and alone, and eventually die himself. The thought of missing out on all of the time I could spend doing things like this wasn't making things any better, either.

With our first mission complete we flew back toward Berk, the sun high in the sky. Toothless and I were drifting lightly through a few afternoon clouds when I pulled my journal back out, flipping through it as casually as the winds allowed. Some pages were packed with words, while others were covered in drawings: inventions, dragons, weaponry, scenery, and of course, a few of Astrid and I riding Toothless together. I admired the pages for a moment before finding a fresh page to draw the view we had of Berk cast in an afternoon glow.

Words couldn't describe the utter beauty of my hometown from above, so I'd taken to drawing it. I had done at least a dozen drawings like this, all at different times of the day, and even a few at night. It was a shame my ability to draw these landscapes wasn't better, because the night view was simply awe-inspiring. It was even more breathtaking from above the clouds, with the Northern Lights shining brightly through the dark.

Both the afternoon and lunch were quickly arriving, meaning I would be expected to be at the Mead Hall to eat with my other classmates. Dragon Training wasn't just meant to forge the iron-will and capacity to ruthlessly murder dragons, it was also meant to build a bond with your fellow warriors. I'd never had much luck with building any bonds though, and Gobber thankfully didn't force me to mingle with them. I also wasn't a warrior, which didn't help things.

The only thing I excelled at that could be considered useful to a warrior was smithing. I was a great blacksmith, especially for my age, and I did enjoy the trade. But my real passion, what I really loved to do, was fly. And it'd be great if I could find a place where they needed a dragon trainer, because I could do it, and better than anyone. I was far more comfortable around dragons than I was around Vikings, and if not for Gobber, my Father and Astrid, I probably would've stolen a bunch of supplies and left Berk weeks ago.

A smile coming to my face, I began rubbing Toothless' head, having him croon in reaction. We'd done this so many times that he could tell exactly what I wanted without me saying it. In one swift motion we snapped immediately into a back flip, and at the pinnacle of our stunt, I pulled off the straps to my harness and let go of the saddle's handles. Flying at high speeds is amazing, but freefalling with a dragon staring at you with a gummy smile on his face is something else entirely. And honestly, I think Toothless enjoyed the stunts more than I did, just because of how happy they made us both.

We fell for a few more minutes, and then, like two parts of a whole, came back together and began pulling out of the dive almost directly over Berk. I usually tried to avoid racing past the village at high speeds, considering the problems it could cause if anyone saw me. With how fast we were going post-dive, though, I wasn't worried anyone would notice that the black blur screeching over their heads

was carrying a person, let alone me. Not to mention it was always satisfying to come back into town to see the bewildered looks the villagers gave each other, wondering what a **Night **Fury would be doing out during the day. But the best part of doing it was, of course, Snotlout's terrified face, constantly scanning the skies, asking with a whimper if 'that damn black thing is gone yet.'

With our single dive out of the way, Toothless and I began making our way back to the Cove. I'd rather stay in the air, but the last time I ditched lunch with the group, Gobber yelled at me and made me clean the forge, which stole an entire half a day of flying from us. From then on, even if I'd get there late, I'd still always show up, so I didn't have to waste any more time in the village than necessary. However, as we sped by, I noticed something.

Gobber was making his way toward the forge as we finished pulling out of the dive over the village. Hoping he'd stay in there long enough for us to have a little more fun, Toothless and I directed ourselves to the same rocky formations that nearly killed us both when I was still using my cheat sheet. With how far we'd improved since then, ducking between those rocks came so naturally and quickly that we didn't have to think; it was all just instinct. Sliding left and right, though boulders and pillars, barreling through a flock of seagulls, the sea spitting lightly in my face, it all felt just like home to me, like I should've been born a dragon instead of a Viking. Coming out the other side towards the ocean again, I looked down at Toothless.

"That was great, but we've really gotta head back to the cove, bud. No more time for stunts until later; I have a lunch to get to." He nodded in understanding, pulling us into a U-turn back to the rocks we just came out of. A grin spread across my cheeks again when I realized what path he wanted us to take.

"Well, I don't see why not. I mean, it IS the fastest way to the Cove from here. but lets make it interesting, okay, Toothless?" I said, scratching his neck. He chirped in delight as I tightened my grip and got ready for another set of obstacles. On our approach to the first set of crags we suddenly inverted, making the ocean seem like a reflective sky. Once we steadied ourselves Toothless began picking up speed as we tore our way back up the mountain of Berk. Toothless and I had flown this direction once before, but we'd never done it upended like we were. By all accounts I should have been terrified, but instead I felt more and more alive with every passing moment. I may not be brave with a weapon, I may not be useful in a fight, but It'd be a cold day in Hel when anyone could call me a coward in the air.

Toothless and I sped back to the Cove (upside down the entire way, just to see if we could), landing gracefully right by the den I'd built for myself. I pulled off the flying tack and stored it away, swapping out my riding vest for my bearskin vest. I started thinking of ways to combine the two while giving Toothless a brush down with a wire brush I made at the forge. It cleaned in between his scales and he'd croon so happily whenever I scrubbed at the spots my riding harness had been digging into him at. I was still ironing out its kinks; more for his comfort than for mine, since he was the one doing most of the work. After a few more minutes of brushing, I looked up into the sky to check the sun's height above the horizon.

"Well bud, it's already time, so I've gotta get going. But I'll see you in a little while, I promise." Toothless purred at me again, standing on his haunches and giving me one of his dragon hugs. Being grabbed, held onto and then enveloped completely by the wings of a dragon is something that takes a bit of getting used to, but now I find it so comforting that I wish it didn't have to end. I wrapped my arms around his massive frame as best I could and he gave another one of his low-pitched dragon laughs. "Yeah, yeah. I love you too, Toothless," I responded quietly to his laughter. He hugged me a little tighter, but still remarkably gently for a creature that could rip a fully grown tree in half if he wanted to. After a moment he let go, backed up a bit and burned out a small section of dirt with a wisp of his plasma breath. Satisfied it was warm enough, Toothless curled up on top of the burnt patch of earth. He looked up at me and then gestured back to my village, knowing just as well as I did that I was already late.

"I'll see you later." It almost sounded like someone was saying it in unison with me, and when my eyebrow raised at this odd phenomenon Toothless just laughed at me again.

"I really need to stop dreaming about Astrid so I can get a decent night's sleep. I swear I'm going nuts." I muttered under my breath as I walked away, running my hands through my hair so it didn't look so wind-swept. I rubbed some leaves on my vest and green tunic to make them smell less like a sea breeze and walked my way back to the village, pulling out my journal as I traveled. I quickly scribbled away at what I had just experienced, getting down the details as accurately as possible.

* * *

><p>I finished writing my thoughts and closed my journal, placing it in my bearskin vest just as I heard the sound of an axe slamming into wood. Sure enough, Astrid was still training away on the forest's trees. She'd been at it for several hours now, considering all of the frayed timber, and was apparently so focused she hadn't noticed my mildly noisy approach. Trying to keep it that way, I quietly headed back toward the Cove to take a different route when I stopped.<p>

I didn't want to talk to her because it would probably end poorly for me, but I knew pretty well how the girl worked. If she was that focused, she'd probably be completely unaware of how close our 'bonding' lunch time was. Gobber would definitely go easier on her than he would on me, but I still felt like I should say something to her. As I tried to figure out a way to announce my presence that didn't end in getting axed, Astrid finally noticed me. She hooked her weapon over her shoulder and scowled before saying anything.

"Why are you here?" She demanded, staring daggers at me. I thought back to Toothless and the bravery I felt flying on his back enough to speak again.

"I'm just passing through, Astrid. I had no idea you were here. Besides, didn't you once tell me I'm better off spending time in the woods where I can't break anything important?" She seemed almost taken aback by my sarcasm, since I usually only stammered her name when she approached me. I could only thank Toothless for that. Even if it would eventually wear off as I returned to my stammering, timid self.

"Yeah, I did. But it's a big forest, so find your own spot," She spat back at me.

"Like I said. I'm, uh... I'm just passing through. I didn't know you were here. I'll leave you to your tree... Murder... Training. But you should really get to the Mead Hall, since its almost lunch and Gobber wants us to 'bond' as warriors," I churned out dryly. Astrid's face lost some of its anger as she glanced up at the sun.

"Well, good point; I'm almost done, anyway. Now get out of here, you're breaking my concentration." She gave me another steely look as she turned, taking aim at one of the few unmarked timbers remaining in this part of the forest. With a small yell she whipped her weapon toward her target, landing the blow perfectly. The axe sat there for a moment before being ripped out again by its owner and whipped at another tree, this time slamming into one noticeably further away from me than the others.

"Right, so you're just going to ignore me now. You know, for once it'd be nice to have an actual conversation with someone without them acting like I was some sort of troll or butt-elf." With that, I started walking away.

"What did you say?" She asked, both in surprise and anger. I sighed for what felt like the millionth time over her and turned back.

"Nothing. I said nothing. Look, just make sure you aren't late, for your own sake. I had to spend six hours cleaning the forge when I ditched one of these stupid 'bonding lunches' and that included shuffling through what I thought were cleaning rags. I was digging through them for five minutes before Gobber kindly informed me that's where he kept his spare undies." I would've laughed at the look of terror and disgust on Astrid's face if I hadn't felt so angry at that moment, a feeling that caught me off guard. I couldn't remember the last time she'd really irritated me to the point of anger.

"I'm sorry. Thanks for telling me," she replied quietly. Her response was not what I had been expecting, and my only reaction was to stand there, baffled. After years of being snuffed and ignored, Astrid had actually apologized to me. And on top of that, she had thanked me. Before I could say anything about the change in behavior, though, she went and tugged her axe from the tree it was wedged in. With a small swing it was hooked back over he shoulder as she continued talking.

"You should clean yourself up a little before you head in, by the way. You look like you were attacked by a tree." She looked me up and down before taking leave. I stared at her as she walked away, coming back to my senses and swatting some of the leaves still clinging to my vest when she was out of sight. I straightened out my clothing, making it look about as presentable as it usually did, and began to take Astrid's path back to the village. I couldn't help but wonder why she'd suddenly decide to give me a kind word, but nothing really came to mind to explain it.

I was definitely not looking forward to getting back to Berk, even if I had just grazed it earlier on Toothless. I never looked forward to the lunches; since the Mead Hall was the heart of the island, I stuck

out there the most. Even with a decent chunk of the villagers and Gobber being there whenever I was, the twins and Snotlout still had ample opportunities to beat on me. Things would be different if I had Toothless with me, but I couldn't exactly rely on him for everything.

3. Unexpected Reactions

Astrid had already entered the Mead Hall by the time I'd reached the village. The streets of Berk were mostly empty, what with everyone in the Hall, leaving me with a quiet stroll to my destination. I ran my hands through my hair again as I walked, hoping it would return to its naturally messy state. I also checked my vest one more time for leaves and the odd bit of dragon slobber. Smelling of rotten fish might be common in Berk for some, but for a sweaty blacksmith's apprentice who was often mocked for bathing a lot, it wasn't at all common for me.

With my appearance mostly back to normal and myself at the top of the Hall's staircase, I sighed and slowly began pushing the large door open. I only opened it wide enough for me to fit through, and had slipped myself halfway into the hall when the door slammed shut on my ribcage. Snotlout and the twins started laughing loudly at the sight of me pinned by the door, trying to mimic the look on my face right as I'd been hit. They mocked me their entire way back to their usual table where Fishlegs and Astrid were already seated, neither of whom seemed to notice anything.

I pulled myself through the rest of the doorway after my breathing returned to normal and walked to the serving table while rubbing my chest. Life on Berk didn't always afford us much food, and today all there was to choose from were different cuts of turkey. I grabbed a leg and a cup of mead, and then made my way to my usual spot: a small table at the far end of the hall.

Gobber and the rest of the trainees sat at a much larger table nearby, talking about random things and listening to Gobber's old dragon war stories. I'd heard them thousands of times before, so I wasn't exactly missing anything important or exciting. Still, it probably would've been nice to be included with them every once in a while, preferably in a way that didn't involve pain, or the number of ways one could cause it.

After choking down as much of the dry bird leg as I could, I pushed my plate aside and took a small sip of the mead in my cup. I'd never been much of a fan of alcohol, but there was a lot of it and I didn't mind drinking some every once in a while. Today, though, I was drinking mostly to mellow myself out and relax from an entire day of whipping around Berk on the back of Toothless, a job it was doing wonders with. I felt myself loosen up as I sat there, thinking about my day in the air and the girl I always had on my mind. I was almost completely lost in those thoughts when I noticed something flying directly at me from the other table. Without a thought I slipped to one side and stood up, narrowly avoiding the turkey bone flying past my head. It popped in two when it hit the wall next to me, both pieces clattering to the floor.

I stood there in shock for a moment, reeling at the speed of what I'd just done. Despite my small size I wasn't exactly known for being

agile, making my burst of swiftness all the more surprising. That is, until I considered what all of the flying with Toothless had been doing to me over the past month, and the muscles I'd been overworking just to keep in the saddle. I was about to plunge back into my own thoughts about the idea when Snotlout tried taunting me again.

"Hey Fishbone, stand still this time. That leg was supposed to break on your face, not the wall." Before I could retort he flung his plate at me, showering his table and the immediate area with bits of turkey. It was even easier to dodge than the bone, and after it clattered to the floor I threw back the rest of my mead and picked it up. I tossed the now cracked plate harmlessly on my table, where it landed next to my own with a hollow thud. I placed my cup next to it, cleared my throat and turned my attention to Gobber, who was busy wiping turkey skin out of his moustache.

"Look, I'm done eating, and as long as I stay here Snotlout's going to keep trying to throw stuff at me. And if he keeps it up, the twins will join in, and I really don't want to be the reason for a food fight in this hall. So could I please just leave?" Gobber eyed me, not looking very happy. He sat there in thought for a moment before turning his attention to the other teens: Snotlout and the twins were sneering while slowly pulling more plates towards themselves, Fishlegs looked like he wanted to be anywhere else and Astrid was staring me down much like she had back in the woods. There was a different kind of quality in her eyes, though; rather than condemning, the look about her was a mixture of shock and suspicion. Only a month ago those two thrown items would have knocked me to the floor with a whimper, and she knew it.

Gobber started up. "Look, lad, the point of eating together is--"

"A bonding experience, I know," I interrupted him, "but it's really hard to bond with the rest of the group when all they want to do is use me as a target for their stupid pranks or outright pretend I don't exist. It's like I told you before, Gobber: oil and water. This isn't going to happen, so I don't see the point of keeping me here when all it's going to do is interrupt the real bonding that you six," I gestured to the other teenagers and Gobber, "are all doing." He looked at me again, and then at the others, and then back at me once more. There was a twinge of disappointment in his eyes, but I could tell what was about to happen because of how well I knew the man.

"Alrigh' lad. You do make a valid point. This does ten' ta happen a lot, it seems."

"Every day, actually." I replied.

"Alrigh', but that isn't gon'ta excuse you from eatin' with the res' of us. Ya still have to come here, an' ya still hafta eat wit us. An' I mean REALLY eat with us, not sittin' yerself in a corner where no one can talk to ya. Butcha don' have to stay when yer done. Jus' as long as you see what the experience is like, I think you'll get the hang of it." Taking a swig from his tankard-arm, Gobber turned to Snotlout, a distinct frown etched upon his face. "An' you, boy, you hafta clean up the mess ya've made. An' for attackin' someone off guard, I'm also gonna make ya wash all the tables in here, as well." Gobber grinned as Snotlout let out an irritated groan, looking at me angrily and clutching his other turkey leg in his left hand. I

thanked Gobber and turned to head out of the hall, grateful that I didn't have to sit there any longer, trying to do any more 'bonding.' Hopefully his concession finally meant I'd only have to be in the hall for a maximum of thirty or forty minutes each day, rather than the usual three or four hours. Thinking about the surprised look I'd see on Toothless' face when I came back two hours earlier than I normally would, I reached to grab the door, only to turn when I heard Gobber yelling.

"LAD, WHA' IN THOR'S NAME ARE YA DOI-" He stopped and gaped. The entire room had gone dead quiet, and I was about ready to pass out from shock at what had just happened. Snotlout had picked up a spare knife sitting from his table when my back was turned and angrily whipped it in my direction. I noticed it coming just as I'd turned back around, and only had a moment to try and throw my hand in its path. With my heart racing, I slowly looked down at my torso, expecting to see the handle protruding from my chest or stomach. Instead, I found the knife gripped firmly in my right hand less than a hair's width from my vest. There was still a bit of blood seeping out of me though, since I'd caught the blade itself instead of the handle.

Uncomfortable silence almost seemed to echo throughout the hall. Snotlout was slowly shrinking back into his seat as most of the diners and drinkers stared him down, his own table especially. The dull, throbbing pain that was growing in the crook of my thumb kept me from really enjoying the situation, as did the fresh stream of blood slowly oozing down my palm and wrist.

"How far in did it go?" Gobber's unusually soft voice startled me a bit; I was so focused on having caught the knife that I didn't notice the very large and peg-legged man hobble up to me. He was gentle and slow while he looked at the damage to my hand, but despite that I could tell by the look on his face that he was furious. Gobber was like a surrogate father to me, often being the only bridge between myself and my real father, so he could get protective at times.

"Eh, just broke the skin. No big deal, right? We're Vikings; I can handle a little cut." I slipped around Gobber and walked back over to the table, a blank look on my face. Snotlout was clearly both angry and terrified; angry at me for showing him up three times in a span of less than an hour, and terrified of what Gobber would do to him. I looked Snotlout dead in the eyes and stared for a moment as I dropped the bloody knife on the bench in front of him, which sprayed a few tiny specks of blood on the table as it chattered against the wood. "I think you dropped this." I kept my face stony, focusing on Toothless in my mind to keep my resolve. My thoughts were so far away that I paid almost no mind to the rest of the hall, the other teens staring at me or the blood now freely flowing from the knifeless wound. Without another word I turned and started to leave, not bothering to stem the blood leaking from my hand. As I passed Gobber again, he looked at me with an eyebrow raised in apparent confusion. I forced a smile in response, fighting back all of my pent up nervousness and pain, and told him, "I'll be fine. But I think Snoutlout should probably clean up the floor, too. After all, look at this mess. I'm leaking everywhere." Gobber didn't seem to care for the joke, and grunted in dismissal as he pulled a cloth out of his pocket.

"Boy, ya need ta-"

"Yeah, I know," I cut him off, since I knew what he was about to say. "I'll go and see a healer about this gouge now. I'll talk to you later, Gobber." With that I walked out of the hall, specifically pressing my bleeding hand firmly against the right door as I tugged the other open. The bloody handprint it left behind would seep into the wood of the door, giving Snotlout extra work to do. The door slammed shut as I started down the stairs, but it wasn't nearly thick enough to keep Gobber's voice contained.

"SNOTLOUT, YA OVERGROWN HALF-TROLL, I DON' CARE HOW USELESS YA THIN' HE IS, YA DON' GO THROWN' KNIVES AT 'IM! I WAN THIS ENTIRE HALL CLEAN BEFORE SUNRISE TOMORROW! START CLEANIN'! **NOW!**" I smirked and laughed a little before giving into the pain shooting from my hand. I started leaning against the stone railing of the Mead Hall stairs, breathing heavily and balling my right hand into a fist. Tightening my grip seemed to slow the blood flow as well as the pain, but not nearly enough for my liking. My chest was still throbbing from being hit by the door earlier, but catching the knife had caused a much deeper wound. The knife hadn't just cut my thumb open, either; it sliced through the tip of my ring and middle fingers, as well. Still, I decided against seeing a healer, since I'd dealt with worse injuries myself in the past. I'd even been injured just as badly while flying through the treetops with Toothless before, so I went home and did some quick cleaning and self-bandaging with some cloth I'd found hanging near the hearth.

With my injury cleaned and bandaged, I went around the house and began dusting off furniture and shifting things around. I wanted to make the place look like it hadn't been basically abandoned for an entire month, just in case someone actually did come looking for me after Snotlout's little stunt. I threw some logs onto the hearth and lit them with a flint to heat the house back up while I went up to my room.

It was just as messy as always, but now covered in a thin layer of dust since I'd been living at the cove. I had long since meant to clean the place up so I had more room to store and work on all of the ideas flying around in my head, but spending time with Toothless had eaten through all of that. I resigned myself to the state of the room and stepped over a pile of broken model bits and hardware to rummage through the clean clothes lying near my bed. It didn't take long to find a tunic that didn't have blood droplets or any obvious stains on it, and after donning the fresh shirt I threw the bloody one in a pile of scrap cloth in a corner of my room.

I shut my door and came back downstairs, doing one last check to make sure the place looked satisfactorily lived-in before heading back to the cove. I was about to slip out the back door when I heard a knock coming from the front of the house. It was an odd sound to hear with the house as empty as it was, since no one really visited the house whenever my father was away, outside of Gobber. I made my way to the front door and opened it, expecting to see Gobber staring down at me, when my eyes flew open wide at the sight of Astrid standing in the doorway.

"Uh, hi! Astrid! Hi Astrid, hi, uh... What, what uh, what are you doing h-here?" I stammered away again. I tried focusing on Toothless like I did before, but between the pain in my hand and the fact that I hadn't seen him in almost two hours, my bravery was shot.

Apparently unbothered by my stammering, Astrid flicked her hair to the side of her face and asked me a question in monotone.

"Is your hand okay?" Her comment surprised me; she hadn't asked about my well-being or my feelings in years. I looked down to my bandaged hand and shrugged before I spoke in return.

"Yeah. The cuts weren't deep enough for stitches and I've dealt with worse. Blacksmith's apprentice and all." I looked at her and took another breath, and then looked away, not knowing what I should say or do. I was certain if Toothless were here I'd be able to talk to her, but even then it probably wouldn't be easy. Luckily for me she saved me from having to say anything else.

"Snotlout's never been that angry at you before. I don't know what his problem is, but Gobber reminded him that Stoick would be coming back soon, along with Snotlout's father, and they'll both be hearing about this knife incident. You probably don't have anything to worry about from him, since you know how your father's going to react to the news." She brushed her hair out of her face again, giving me a good look at her beautiful blue eyes. "One more thing: the twins were talking about following you into the woods and tying you to a tree, so I'd watch your back if I were you." I looked at her in surprise.

"Wait... You hate me. Why are you telling me this?" Her eyes widened a little at the reminder, but other than that her face remained still.

"I'm just helping you out because I would've completely missed that 'stupid bonding lunch,' as you called it, if you hadn't said anything. And I don't like being in any kind of debts with anyone, so this is just me paying you back. Besides, Snotlout's been hitting on me all day, and seeing that look of fear in his eyes when he realized he'd thrown a knife at the son of Stoick the Vast was like having Snoggletog come early this year." I laughed a little, and she actually smirked a bit herself before her mouth fell into a partial grimace. "But this doesn't mean you can keep sneaking up on me in the forest again." She ended the statement sternly, with a bit of a glare coming to her face. I sighed.

"Look, I really wasn't sneaking up on you. Really. I wander around the forests of Berk pretty much every day. You just happened to be training in one of the areas I tend to frequent is all. If you like training there, then by all means, keep at it. I'll just avoid that place from now on. Then you won't have to worry about privacy issues." I ran my right hand through my hair again to get it out of my face, causing my tunic to ride up my arm. Astrid cocked her head a bit when I did that, but I paid it no mind.

"Well, if you're really not stalking me in the woods then I'm not going to say you can't go to certain places. I train in more than one area anyway, so don't worry about it." She looked down to my right hand again, and then quickly grabbed my arm before I could pull away and yanked the sleeve of my tunic back up. "Hiccup, why do you have bruise marks on the ****back**** of your hands? Even you aren't that clumsy. Usually." I looked down at my hands and then back up at her. I couldn't exactly tell her the truth, that the marks were from a leather covering I had made for Toothless's riding tack to protect my hands from the wind. It was far too stiff, and as such would dig into

my hands while we were flying, which led to some cuts and several bruises. I'd replaced it with a design that didn't rub against my hands after that first flight, but the bruises still remained for her to see. Since I couldn't explain them with the whole truth, I took the next best option: a half-truth.

"Oh, that? It's just from another one of my contraptions backfiring on me. Slapped me across both my hands, left a pretty nice bruise. Then I, uh, melted it down. Destroyed all of the blueprints, actually. Burnt them in the forge." As the lie left my lips I hoped to the Gods that she'd buy it. I couldn't handle much more of her questioning, and the more she asked brought her closer to possibly making connections to the truth. One of my favorite things about Astrid was her intelligence; she was much smarter than she let on.

"Well, they looked kinda like they're from constant wearing, not a quick slap," she replied, eyeing my hand again. One of the most terrifying things about Astrid was that she was smart, and far too observant for my sake.

"Uh, like, uh, what... Do you mean, ex-exactly?" She looked me dead in the eyes.

"Nothing. It's just that they remind me of a few bruises my father's gotten in the past from using shields too small for his hands. Anyway, I'm going to get back to the woods, and even though I said I believed your story doesn't mean I won't throw something at you myself if I catch you watching me again. Goodbye."

She turned on her heel and walked off in a much different direction than I'd be heading. I stood there, heart in my throat, staring at her as she marched away. I was about to shut the door when I noticed her stop in her tracks and glance back at me. I stood there and kept staring, again not knowing what to do with myself in her presence, when I noticed her shoulders slump as she let out a sigh. She turned back around and returned to the door, looking both determined and a bit sad, oddly enough.

"Hiccup, look. That's not the only reason I came to see you. I'm... I'm sorry I told you I hated you. I don't. I was just really frustrated that day and you just happened to interrupt a training routine I'd been constantly screwing up for weeks. I had almost landed it perfectly when you showed up and startled me." I had no idea what to think about what she was saying. The idea of an apology seemed so alien to me that my mind was a blank. In the silence, Astrid decided to finish speaking.

"Anyway, I really do have to get going. I'll see you later." Without waiting for a response, she turned once more and walked away at her usual brisk pace. I watched her head toward the forest for a moment before finally shutting the door to my house and locking it. I took a few steps toward the back door before losing the strength in my legs and collapsing, just as I'd done when I first cut Toothless out of those damned bolas.

I'd collect myself in a little while and head to the cove after regaining the ability to walk. I probably didn't have too many nights left to spend with Toothless, and I certainly didn't want to waste any more time than I had to, even if I'd be wasting it thinking about

the girl I'd always loved.

4. Seventy-Two Hours Remain

__**A/N: **__If it seems like it's an obvious reference, it's because it is.__

* * *

><p>It turns out that the Gods didn't want to give me even a little bit of time to collect myself in peace as I lay on the cold stone floor of my father's house. Not thirty seconds after I began taking my impromptu nap came the sound of two fists rapidly knocking on the door I'd just shut and locked. There was no doubt in my mind who those fists belonged to, considering the advice Astrid had just given me about the twins.<p>

"Ruff, Tuff, leave me alone. I already know you plan on tying me to a tree in the forest, so I'm not opening the door." I closed my eyes again, hoping they'd leave me be. I knew fully well that wouldn't happen, but I still hoped for it.

"Hey dragonbreath, we aren't going to tie you to a tree in the forest anymore! But you have to admit it was a pretty good plan," I heard Tuff exclaim. Exasperated, and losing more time I could be spending with Toothless, I rolled over onto my back and started lightly shouting at the door.

"Plan? How is that a plan? All it requires is rope, a tree, and a moron who willingly opens his door to two people who have, in the past, tied him to random trees in the forest. That is not a plan. It requires no steps, no thinking; just rope and stupidity." I continued to lie there, staring at the ceiling of the house. I was considering just making a break for it out the back when I heard another voice pop up.

"We're not here to do anything to hurt you, Hiccup, we swear! We just wanna know how you managed to DO that today! It was incredible. It's like your speed jumped by plus five overnight!" Fishlegs did seem to be excited about hearing my secrets, but like Hel I was about to tell anyone in this village anything even remotely close to the truth. Sitting up, I heaved myself to my feet and walked to the door, leaning my back against it. I cleared my throat to let them know I was about to speak.

"I did it because I've officially been Gobber's apprentice for the last nine years. If you don't have quick hands when working with razor sharp blades and molten steel, you tend to regret it." I knew the twins would buy it, but Fishlegs was there and he'd see the obvious flaw in that statement. I was surprised to hear Ruffnut speak up first.

"Idiot, you've been his apprentice for nine years, so what? Two weeks ago I threw a rock at you and you didn't even notice. And you were looking straight at me." I heard the other two sniggering on the other side of the door while I rubbed the top of my head, the bump from the rock long since gone.

"In my defense, I was deep in thought. Though I'm sure only Fishlegs

understands the concept."

"I understand it. Ruffnut doesn't, though."

"Who asked you, yakface?"

"Like I need permission to speak, hag!"

"Dragon brain!"

"TROLLHEAD!"

"SNOTLOUT'S BOYTOY-"

"CAN THE TWO OF YOU PLEASE STOP ARGUING FOR ONCE AND LET HICCUP SPEAK?! We could start Dragon Training ANY day now. Stoick's due to come back TOMORROW if their schedule is on time and that means that we'll start actually fighting Dragons in two days! If Hiccup's figured out how to move faster then we need to know! I don't know about you guys, but I'd take any advice at this point, just to calm my nerves." In the brief silence that followed I'd come up with a decent idea of how to get them to leave so I could finally go see Toothless. I cleared my throat.

"If dad is coming back tomorrow and we start training in only two days, then there's not much you can do to improve what you already have by much. But I'm serious, the forge is what gave me the bulk of my hand movements. I've just... I've been... Swimming, a lot, lately. And that's made me a little faster is all. See, nothing exciting." I slowly exhaled, hoping my barely-constructed sentence would work. A few more seconds of silence passed.

"He's right, you know. Two days isn't a lot of time to work with," came Ruffnut, sounding a bit deflated.

"I'm not swimming. Hiccup, you're insane. You'd freeze to death!" Fishlegs exclaimed. He was probably right, especially for someone like me. But as long as they bought it, I didn't care.

"Oh, grow up, you big baby," came Tuffnut's voice. "Ocean water's fine once you get used to it. But it doesn't matter anyway; Hiccup's right. There's only two days left before Stoick gets back, probably, and that's not a lot of time." A thump came to the door, which I assumed was the sound of Tuffnut's head slamming into it. "Ugh. I told you this was a stupid idea," I heard Tuffnut moan. I listened intently to the silence that followed, hoping to Thor they'd finally left. I was almost convinced of it until I heard Fishlegs' voice again.

"So are you going to open the door?" He asked. I had no intention of letting any of them in the house, even if I knew Fishlegs wouldn't do anything to me. I still didn't have any reason to trust the twins, and they were probably still out there.

"Why?" I blurted out. "I'm still not so sure you're not going to tie me to a tree, or something else equally stupid." Really, I didn't think anyone could blame me for being suspicious.

"Well, we can't exactly blame him for that reaction, anyway. I mean, we have done it to him more than once," Tuffnut said with a chuckle.

Ruffnut chimed in.

"We always cut you loose, though." She stated.

"After several hours, yeah." I replied.

"But we still did it," she retorted.

"Look, I'm not opening this door." I tried to say it with the kind of authority my voice utterly lacked, but all I accomplished was making Tuffnut snort.

"Come on guys, lets just go practice by ourselves some more. Hiccup's run outta useful information." Tuffnut's comment came through quietly, like he was finally walking away from the house. I had no idea where the other two stood, but Ruffnut's voice cleared up part of that mystery for me.

"Right. But before we go, Hiccup, it was actually pretty cool how you didn't seem to give a shit about Snotlout throwing a knife at you. But you're still a scrawny little punching bag." I was beginning to tire of being surprised so many times in one day, but I'd never gotten a compliment from Ruff before.

"Yeah, and the look his face? When he realized what Stoick and his Dad are gonna do to him? I will never forget it." Tuffnut quietly laughed at the mental imagery from where he was standing.

"Yeah, it was a real nice catch. Goodbye, Hiccup," I heard Fishlegs say in a sad voice. They walked off, leaving me alone and bathed in quiet once again. I sat there against the door for a few more minutes, and after accepting that they had really left, quickly leaned forward and burst out the back door. I began sprinting as fast as I could to the cove, making sure no one was following me.

* * *

><p>I hurriedly jumped down the series of rocks that made up the rear entry to the cove and began to look for Toothless, only to have him lightly pounce on me again and happily start licking my face in surprise at my hour-early arrival. I managed to get him off of me, and after cleaning slobber from myself I went through everything: Talking to Astrid in the forest, Snotlout throwing a knife at me (Toothless let out a hearty growl at that part - Snotlout's really going to regret that decision if he ever somehow meets Toothless), talking to Astrid again, and the twins and Fishlegs actually being impressed with my catching the knife. I also briefly mentioned dragon training, and how I'd be forced into it when my father returned.<p>

This was a touchy subject for me, especially considering my relationship with Toothless, and as such I still hadn't tried explaining it to him. I knew I'd have to do it, and soon, but not before we had a chance to get back into the air. My mind was still muddy from the entire situation at the Mead Hall and more flying would surely remedy the problem.

I gathered our riding equipment once more as Toothless purred happily, knowing we'd be flying again so soon after my departure. I double checked some straps, tested the prosthesis, checked the

connections to the tailfin and made sure its newly designed buckles sat comfortably over Toothless' scales. After making sure everything was secure and comfortable, we catapulted back into the air.

We'd already done this dozens if not hundreds of times before, and yet it always felt like the first time: the sensation of my stomach dropping to my feet, my heart fluttering and pounding, my entire being screaming out that it was in danger. I'd be racked by all of these emotions, and yet, my mind could so effortlessly cancel them out. Whenever we flew like this, Toothless and I properly harnessed together and acting as one, being so high in the air didn't feel dangerous at all. It always felt like home; a place I'd never be happier to see.

I let out a piercing howl and clicked the control stirrup into place, causing Toothless and I to start spinning. I clicked it again, forcing us straight down, and after completing our first successful front flip without me slipping out of the saddle, we were once more launched into the skies by Toothless's immensely powerful wings. We pierced the clouds, flying past them with ease as everything below us started getting smaller and smaller. I clicked the stirrup again, closing the prosthesis as Toothless's wings folded to his sides. With no means of support or control, Toothless and I dropped out of the sky, falling back toward the water below just as quickly as we'd climbed. I began screaming with delight as we cut back through the clouds, coming closer and closer to the ocean before Toothless reopened his wings and pulling us out of the dive. I clicked open the tailfin as we slowed down, bringing us to a much more reserved kind of glide than usual.

With a few good stunts out of the way for the time being, I decided that now would be just as good a time as any to bring up dragon training to Toothless. I wasn't sure how much of what I said he could actually understand, if anything, but considering the subject matter I felt like I had to say something.

"Okay, buddy, I really need to talk to you about this 'Dragon Training' thing." I ran my hands up and down his neck, telling myself it was for his sake even though I knew it wasn't. "Basically, bud, the 'Viking Tradition' around here is simple: You aren't considered an adult until you've slain a dragon, and I'm being forced into Dragon Training for that exact reason. My dad wants me to kill dragons, and I really, really don't want to." I moved my hand to his head, scratching him firmly behind the ears. He seemed more interested in that than my words, but I kept talking regardless.

"Thanks to you, bud, I've learned more about dragons and the way they really are than I ever imagined possible, and it's clear to me now what I have to do with what I've learned." I grabbed the saddle's handle and clicked the stirrup once again. Toothless reacted in tow, flapping his wings a few times to increase our speed as we climbed back up into the air, Berk growing smaller and smaller once more.

"It all starts with dragon training. I don't want to hurt the dragons in that ring, and I think I have a plan that might help me avoid that. Still, I need to make these sparring matches seem legitimate. Not only do I have to take down my dragon opponent, I have to do it without hurting her, all while my fellow classmates are out to kill

her. Or him. I haven't bothered wondering the gender of the dragons we cage, but for some reason I'm thinking they're all female."

Toothless swiveled an eye up to me, grunted, and nodded. I suppose it wasn't hard for his impressive sense of smell to pick up the scents of the caged dragons when we fly about the village at night, since we can get a lot closer without anyone noticing us.

"Anyway, that's what's really been bothering me. I need to get the other classmates on my side, and winning is the easiest way to do that. The adults never pay me any mind, but if I manage a few victories in the ring I might be able to sway the other teenagers, assuming they start coming around after I start winning. I mean, if I start winning." I clicked my ankle again and we began an even quicker ascent. Toothless vocalized a bit more as he flapped, making a few sounds I didn't know he could.

"I have to be careful about it, though. I can't outperform them too much, even if I do manage to rig the game. If I manage to leave them behind during training, they could hate me for that just as much as they hate me for being weak." With another click we evened out and began gliding near the cloud line. I ran my hands through my hair a few more times, despite it being hopelessly whipped about by the wind, while I ran through all of the ways this might backfire on me. Sure, my classmates could be impressed by a victory or two, and maybe even accept that I wasn't completely incompetent. But even that didn't mean I could get them to accept anything more than that.

"This isn't going to work, is it? The dragons in the pen aren't nearly as tame as you are because they're treated badly! Hel, sometimes they aren't even _fed!_ This is a terrible idea. I don't have a plan. I don't have a decent plan, and I need one, and it's all so messed up-" My rambling stopped the moment I felt a happy purr beneath me. Toothless was staring at me, trying his best to calm my nerves. We were swaying lightly from left to right, the motion brought on by Toothless bending his wings as we glided through the air. Our rocking and his purrs were doing wonders for the anxiety I was feeling, and also helped put things into perspective.

"I know, I know, I need to stop worrying so much and just go with it. One more thing, though." I scratched Toothless's left ear a little more before grabbing hold of the handle and clicking my ankle once again, causing our glide to start angling downward. "If I do get them to start listening to me, I'm going to need to convince them dragons aren't dangerous. Meaning at some point in the next few weeks, maybe months, assuming things work out the way I want them to... You may be meeting some of these people. You may even get to meet Astrid. Are you alright with that, bud?" Toothless continued staring at me and purring, and I wasn't sure if he didn't have a response or didn't know what I was saying.

"You can think about it for a while, I guess. Regardless, if I somehow do manage to put this all together, I won't let them bring any weapons. Not that I think you'd be in any danger, I just don't want them to think the weapons are necessary. I also don't want them to think that you'd actually be afraid of a couple of teenage Vikings that can barely fight, either. Well, they can barely fight except for Astrid. She's pretty deadly with that axe of hers, but still, I'm not

worried about you. Just... Just them." Toothless kept his eye trained on me and began nodding his head before breaking into more dragon laughter.

"Well, of course I know you're not afraid of them. It just felt right to ask." Toothless crooned at me, and the message was clear: he appreciated it.

"Good. Now that that's out of the way," I started, clicking the stirrup to fold the prosthetic fin closed, "How about we do some freefalling?" I could see Toothless break into a grin as his wings began folding up, making my stomach drop once again.

* * *

><p>The sun had begun setting, slowly tinting the skies with a deep orange hue. It had been hours since we started, but Toothless and I still hadn't grown tired of flying about Berk and the surrounding area. We were still occasionally keeping an eye out for my father's ship, but the majority of our time was spent screaming through the skies as fast as we pleased. Still, it had to happen eventually, and before long we finally came across it: the scouting ship, crowning out of the mists, badly battle damaged and patched up in several places.<p>

Using the twilit sky to disguise ourselves, we quickly caught up to the ship. As my eyes tried to make out shapes on the small boat, I thought back to the dock's timekeeping logs. The Dockmaster kept a running schedule of when a boat would be out, and a rough guess as to when it might return from its particular voyage based on our fleet's average return time from certain locations. However, it didn't factor in weather or choppy seas, and the suggested return schedules were usually unreliable as a result. This time, though, the Dockmaster's guess seemed to be close to the truth.

Fishlegs might like to worry over stupid things sometimes, but in this particular occasion, his fear wasn't unfounded; My father was heading back to Berk, only about a half-day behind schedule. Instead of getting back tomorrow night, he'd be getting back at midday, the day after. That meant I only had two more nights with Toothless and only three days before Dragon Training began if nothing else got in their way.

We pulled close enough to the ship for me to see some details with my spyglass. I managed to catch a glimpse of my father, looking displeased as usual, after coming back once more from Helheim's Gate without finding the nest. I had a feeling they wouldn't be able to find it, as I was beginning to think only a dragon could reach that place.

Toothless and I circled around them for a while longer, trying to hear any conversations that might have been going on while they sailed back home. Unfortunately, the crew was battered, tired and apparently none too talkative, because the ship was completely quiet save for Spitelout's obnoxious snoring. I grinned a little at the sound, since his son shared the same annoying sleeping trait that I knew Astrid couldn't stand. Sure, she'd told me earlier that she hated his advances and flirtations, but it helped to stoke the fire of my barely-smoldering confidence that there was something about me that she preferred in comparison to him. Still, he was the most

obvious future suitor of Berk's finest female warrior-in-training.

Of course, they'd make a terrible couple; they'd butt heads on everything and spend more time arguing than talking, laughing, or anything else. Snotlout's far too arrogant and too focused on constantly trying to show her how perfect he is when it's painfully obvious she isn't interested. Astrid, on the other hand, is too level-headed, independent, and too determined to prove she doesn't need anyone but herself.

I might not know much of courtship or romance, but at least as far as Astrid goes, I'd always figured she'd need someone with a lot of patience and a big heart. That's why I always thought we'd make a good couple, though I hated sounding arrogant about it. But even considering all that, Berk still has its history of following tradition, including arranged marriages. Now, no words had been spoken about the two of them, but it made sense from a warrior-clan standpoint to have the fiercest male and fiercest female make fierce little babies; a thought my brain often refused to process. If that time ever came, I'd probably banish myself from the clan.

Stroking Toothless's head absentmindedly, my foot clicked back a bit and we began to descend. I wasn't even in control of it anymore; it's as though when I jumped on his back, Toothless's mind took over my left leg. I was appreciative of that as we descended, since I was getting tired and had a lot on my mind. With my father coming back, I was also getting pretty worried.

I didn't want to leave Toothless alone in the cove for hours on end, even if he was a dragon, and I didn't want to be alone for that long, either. I silently wished I could get out of dragon training as my eyes began drooping further and further closed. Noticing my face and the slowing response from the fin, Toothless lightly slapped me with one of his earflaps to wake me back up. I jumped a bit, coming back around to full consciousness as I responded to the slap.

"Sorry, bud. I guess I'm more tired than I thought. All of this flying is really getting to me." I rubbed my stomach, which felt like it was on fire from flying around all day. "Some days I wake up and everything hurts just because of how much time we spend flying. But it's a good kind of hurt, so don't worry about it. It just means I'm getting better at staying stable when we're out here. Speaking of which, Toothless, why don't we wake me up a bit? Blow through what's left of my energy so we can both get a good, deep, long nights rest, what do you say?" Toothless purred happily as he picked up the pace, pulling us ever higher into the air.

We quickly spiraled upward, the clouds above us getting bigger, passing by and then shrinking below. The sky became clearer and darker as we rose, the air colder. By the time we leveled back out, we were much higher than we'd ever been; of this I was certain. But I'd noticed something else quite peculiar: no matter how far up we went, the moon and the stars didn't get any closer. It made me wonder just how distant they really were. It felt as though we could keep flying up into the air and never really make it to them. Sure, everything looked a lot clearer up here, but even so, nothing looked close, especially the ground.

Looking down, I marveled at the sight before me: the ocean, Berk, and

the few islands that sat nearby. Everything was so vast, so far away; the odds of someone like me being born in a place like Berk seemed so unlikely. It seemed even more unlikely that someone from Berk would be able to befriend a dragon, as I had. Everything about the situation I'd found myself in was so extraordinary that I couldn't help but smile at it. It felt like a surge of courage began to flow through me about dragon training. Sure, I may not be a Viking, but I was still a legend in my own right. I'd bridged a gap everyone else figured was impassable, and I did it by ignoring hundreds of years of Viking tradition and befriending the enemy. If I could do that, I could handle Dragon Training.

I screamed in delight as Toothless and I began to spiral down to the ground, tearing through the clouds faster than I'd ever moved in my life. I couldn't even keep my eyes open from the sting of the wind, but it didn't matter to me at all. I trusted Toothless, even at such breakneck speeds, and even when I couldn't see a thing. He's an amazing creature, and I guess by extension, so was I.

"_Left,_" I could almost hear the command. Toothless' thoughts and mine were so well in tune I felt his directions as words in my head, just from the way his body would vibrate and tense up as he moved.

"_Up,_" I did as I was told. I could feel my body pressing hard against the saddle, the sheer force of movement pinning me to my best friend.

"_Down,_" Toothless's body tensed and I clicked the stirrup again, forcing us to plummet even further.

"_Up and right!_" He tensed again, and I could feel his joyous purring echoing through my bones. We soared back up into the sky, Toothless's wings pumping hard on either side of me, dragging us into an even higher upward climb than before. Our speed eventually began tapering off as we stopped climbing, and once the wind calmed enough I reopened my eyes. Berk seemed to be nowhere in sight, with every direction around us seeming like nothing but open ocean. I had no idea where we were until I glanced straight down, just barely managing to notice Berk. It was nothing but a speck in the ocean, like a candle burning in the middle of a black field. Between that and the spectacle of stars and lights above us, I felt like I was getting light-headed and giddy. The light-headedness might've also had something to do with how much harder it felt to breathe while so high in the air, but that wouldn't be an issue for much longer. Noticing how I was acting, Toothless began to descend as I pulled off my harness straps again.

"Oh, I'm definitely looking forward to this. Ready for a midnight plummet, buddy?" I asked, patting him on the head before standing up out of the saddle and balancing myself on Toothless's back. I was getting prepared for the fall when the dragon below me laughed, tucked in his wings and spun me off of him. I yelped in fright for a moment, not expecting to fall from the saddle before I jumped off by myself. Toothless angled himself back over to me as I stopped myself from tumbling, still laughing at me over the sound of the wind blowing past us. I sighed, but with an unmistakable smile on my face.

"Really funny, there, bud. You're quite the comedian," I shouted over

the wind; I knew he could hear me even if I could barely hear myself. I breathed in deeply as we passed through a cloud, enjoying the cool, misty air collecting in my lungs. Laughing, I tucked in my limbs and manage to pull off a few forward rolls before flattening myself out, limbs spread wide, slowing my descent by a tad. I really couldn't think of anything better than being in the air, and after shifting my body into a headfirst dive, I couldn't think of anything more relaxing than freefalling. My thoughts wandered, though, to the same person they always did. Sure, falling alone was great, but I couldn't help but think it would be even better with Astrid with me, a smile on her face, the stars shining in her blue eyes, the light of the moon making her golden hair seem to glow, her lips slowly reaching for mine...

At that point I shook my head, trying to push the thought from my mind and instead focus on the falling we were still doing. I reached out to Toothless and grabbed hold of his tail, climbing it back to the saddle. With my foot in position we quickly pulled out of the freefall and turned back to Berk, casually gliding our way back to the cove.

* * *

><p>After we landed, I followed our usual routine of changing out of my riding gear and scrubbing down Toothless with his wire brush. It only took a few minutes to get the dragon on his back, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and his legs kicking. I finished, and while Toothless righted himself I put his brush away and grabbed a bucket filled with water from the lake. Toothless shot a pillar of fire into it, quickly warming the water up for me. I grabbed some soap and a rag and began washing myself, trying to clean the salt water from my body before we slept. It wasn't Wash Day, and it might not have been a day I spent in the forge, but after all of the flying we'd done I felt pretty sore on top of feeling salty. Some warm, soapy water would feel great on my skin.<p>

Toothless seemed to understand the concept of privacy, too, because while I bathed myself, he had his right tailfin blocking his vision from my cleaning. I was thankful for it, because even though he's my best friend and a dragon, I still felt a bit bashful when I'd bathe myself in the cove. Moving on from the thought I went to work on cleaning myself and my clothes. My right hand stung a little when I pulled off the bandages to clean the knife wounds, but at least there wasn't any blood.

After I was clean and dry, I hung my wet clothes up by the fire pit and grabbed some fresh replacements. I went about redressing the cuts on my hand while Toothless curled up in our usual spot in the cave-turned-den, right next to a pile of clean cloth. I threw a few more logs onto the fire before joining him in the den, and Toothless puffed out another blast of blue to brighten the fire a bit more. I leaned against his scaly hide and pulled out my journal, scribbling down several pages of tiny notes and drawings of the day's events on its pages. As the charcoal tip scraped across the parchment, I absentmindedly start talking to Toothless about Astrid.

"Toothless, honestly bud, I think you'd like Astrid. Plus I'm sure you two would get along well if she could get over you, well, being a dragon and all. She's tough, confident and proud, but I know she's got a softer side. I just don't know why she's hiding it." I closed

my journal, looking at the front of it. Curiously, since I'd never really thought about it until just now, I opened the journal back up, but to the first page. I started counting out some drawings. "Eleven, twelve, thirteen..." I smiled when I reached the thirteenth and final drawing of Toothless. I thought it was the best drawing I'd done, and as such it also happened to be my favorite.

"I've got thirteen full drawings of you in here, bud. I'm not gonna bother counting the doodles, because if I did I wouldn't get any sleep tonight." I went back to counting, this time with a different subject in mind. I turned to the last page again and finished my tallying. I cleared my throat, smiling a little at the face I knew Toothless would be giving me in a moment.

"I, uh, also have a few drawings of Astrid in here. Nothing much, just a few... Dozen." Slowly, I turned to Toothless. Sure enough, he had what could only be described as a knowing grin on his face and his eyes were half lidded, pupils fully dilated. I could almost hear him taunting me in my head.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Pathetic. But here, this is my best drawing of her. You're in it, too. Take a look. She's beautiful." I showed the picture to Toothless. It was a two page drawing of Astrid and I in his saddle, cleaving through a cloud with one of his wings. His eyes were big and happy-looking, his tongue hanging out of his mouth much like it had on our first successful flight. I'd drawn a huge grin on my face and Astrid's, her arms wrapped tightly around me.

His eyes scanned the image, opening and blinking, going from slits to wide open pupils. He grunted to me, and in response I put the journal down. The look he was giving me was one of understanding and agreement. I opened it back up and made a note of his behavior before closing it and putting it in the basket I'd been using as a storage bin for the den. I turned around to sleep on the old quilt I'd laid out for Toothless and I, back when I had set the den up. Toothless had a different idea, though, and with a grumble he opened up his wings, beckoning me inside. He and I both knew I'd be very cold sleeping on an old quilt without my vest on, even with the fire burning at the mouth of the cave. I sighed lightly, crawling over to his open wings. He pulled me in and gently folded his wings over me, emanating a constant purr in an attempt to put me to sleep. It was working, because within a few moments, my heavy eyes shut and I began drifting off.

Images of Astrid and I upon Toothless, flying over the steely waters of the moon began overtaking my senses as I was lulled to sleep by Toothless's purring. "Astrid..." I let slip out of my lips, not immediately even realizing I'd said it. Just before I fell fully into unconsciousness, I heard what I had assumed was my father's voice.

"_Don't worry. You'll see her again soon. Just go to sleep._" I didn't jump this time around; For some reason the voice was comforting to me. Without thinking, I snuggled up in Toothless's wings and replied to it.

"I know I will. I love her, and you. Good night, Toothless." And with that, I passed out.

5. Barriers and Dirty Bets

"_Wake up_." I rolled over, eyes still closed. "_Come on, or we won't have any time._" Whoever kept talking to me did have a point, I thought, in some deep region of my mind. I wasn't really aware of what the words meant, though. The part of my brain that gave them meaning still seemed to be in its own slumber, to which I was slowly returning. That is, until Toothless let out a low, rumbling yawn that shook me to my core, vibrating me awake. I noted that while a bit jarring, being awakened by a dragon's yawning wasn't a terrible way to start the day; it was a lot like getting a very short body massage.

Sliding out from under Toothless's wing I exited the den, standing in my socks next to the fire pit. It was smoldering, but still giving off a decent amount of heat. Looking in the sky to check the time, I guessed I had about three hours to myself before noon would bring on another lunch. I stretched as Toothless sauntered out from the cave behind me, yawning as he crept over to the lake to take a drink. I put on my almost-uncomfortably-warm shoes and grabbed my vest off the rack it was hanging on.

"Oh, hot. Good job again, Toothless. These boots are really nice and warm. The vest, too." I slid it back on over my already equipped riding vest just to bask in its warmth for a moment as Toothless made his way back over by me. I stretched out again, grinning. "I'm pretty sure every muscle in my body hates me right now, but I can't say I regret all of the flying we do." He laughed, poking me in the stomach with his nose.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. We'll go fish up some breakfast, but this time we do it with the net. I don't want to eat breakfast soaking wet. Again." Turning back to the fire, I threw on some more logs and had Toothless jumpstart them for me. I hung my bearskin back where it was drying the night before and grabbed Toothless's saddle. I threw it on him, grabbed my net and we took off. It took us almost no time to reach the ocean, and after checking to see how far along my father's boat was we went and gathered breakfast for ourselves.

* * *

><p>The fire was roaring once again thanks to Toothless, who was busy digging into a small pile of arctic fish as I roasted a sizeable cod against the flames. I was sitting down with my bearskin vest back on, leaning against Toothless's side and wondering how I was going to manage what I knew I needed to do.<p>

"So, dragon training... Hopefully they'll start with the Terror, first. Those little things act all tough, but you show 'em a little love and all of a sudden you're the best thing in the world to them." Toothless purred in agreement.

"Not very bright, but loyal and playful. Something tells me that if Berk wasn't at war with the dragons they'd probably be popular pets." I laughed at the thought of a Terror running around on Gobber, happily avoiding his good hand and purring like crazy. Toothless seemed less enthused about the idea, making a few grumbling noises as I pulled my stick-mounted cod out of the fire and took a bite of it. He became silent again as I moved onto another thought.

"With the way things are going, it looks like my father should be landing tomorrow, on Tyr's Day," I started, speaking in between bites of cod. "It'll probably be some time in the late evening thanks to the storm that hit last night. I'm glad we checked on them before fishing this morning, because now we know for a fact we have more time." The wall of flesh I was leaning against vibrated as Toothless groaned some more. I sat and listened to it for a moment when I noticed several distinct tones buried in his growling. I jotted them down quickly in my journal before continuing.

"Anyway, on Odin's Day, we'll continue like business as usual, since Dad's delay will mean that everything he was planning on doing today he'll have to do tomorrow. But, the day after that, Thor's Day nonetheless... My father, Gobber, the rest of the teens and I will officially start Dragon Training." I ripped the last bit of edible flesh from the cod before throwing it into the fire and leaning back against Toothless, who was vibrating again.

"All I need to do is figure out how to cheat my way to victory, and that shouldn't be too hard to do, thanks to you." My fingers scratched away at Toothless's ears as my thoughts kept churning. "Scare them with those disgusting eels, placate them with some nip... Maybe I could just try playing fetch with one of them; that might work." I stared at the fire as my mind kept working on my predicament. Even if I did manage to cheat my way to victory, there was no guarantee my classmates would listen to me. And even if they would listen, I had no reason to think they'd understand like Toothless did.

From there my mind jumped to a different thought: Toothless. Did he really...?

"Toothless, do you understand what I'm saying? I mean, do you really understand the language I'm speaking?" For some reason I had never considered Toothless might not just be recognizing phrases and patterns, but actively understanding the words I was speaking. I watched him swallow a fish and then turn to me, his left ear twitching a little as he stared. I began to feel rather stupid for asking that question. How would Toothless know what I was saying?

He nodded.

If not for the fact that I had already finished it, I would have choked on my fish. Toothless apparently understood my language, meaning we could have an actual conversation if he could speak it. Speaking of which...

"Toothless, do dragons have their own language?" I held my breath. If I was only a language barrier away from being able to literally communicate with dragons, the vague idea of a plan I had in my head would go from almost impossible to easier than flying Toothless. I hoped and prayed to Thor that my flying partner would nod again as he looked right at me and rumbled. He made the same sound and nodded a second time, confirming my hopes. My face was frozen in surprise and shock as my mind raced to think of questions I could ask, starting with the noise he kept making. Did that sound mean 'yes' for a dragon? Was he trying to speak with me right now? I couldn't think of what to say next as Toothless made the sound again.

"_Yes._"

I jumped back from him in surprise when his response met my ears. It was as though the rumbling formed a word I could actually understand, even though I still heard it as unintelligible vibrating. At that point, I understood. The voices I kept hearing near Helheim's Gate... Those warbling noises were most likely from the dragons that lived there. I must have been understanding their mournful cries to some extent, and the only reason I could imagine to explain it was how much time I'd been spending with Toothless.

Since the beginning I'd been watching him, observing how he acted to better understand the kind of creature he was. He always seemed to have a different noise to make when he was playing around, either by himself or with me, and now I realized all of those noises he had been making weren't being made just for the sake of hearing them. I cleared my throat.

"Toothless. I don't know how we're going to do it, but I need you to teach me how to understand Dragon. If the other dragons can understand me, and I can understand them, I can just tell them my plans and eliminate a lot of potential problems in the process."

"_Yes..._" I heard him rumble again. I couldn't make out the rest of what he was saying, but that didn't matter. If I could learn to translate one word he said, I can translate _all_ of them. The prospect began making me giddy, but how would I accomplish it? And beyond that, how could Toothless even understand my language? I turned to him, feeling ready to burst with the questions I'd been coming up with.

"Toothless, did another dragon teach you to understand Norse?" My curiosity was completely overloaded at this point. I had to know..

"_Yes._" There it was again, the rumbling that meant he was agreeing with me.

"I know I need to get to the Mead Hall in two hours, but I have a lot of questions to ask and I'm dying to get into the air. It's worth risking another half day in the forge. Lets go for a quick flight, okay, Toothless?" I knew he'd want to, and unsurprisingly he jumped up, hopping over to me and rumbling a different sound I took to mean "_Get on._" I didn't hesitate, and in seconds we were airborne.

* * *

><p>I was honestly surprised that my journal hadn't caught fire with how fast I'd been writing in it. We'd taken off and after a few swift flips, Toothless leveled out. With the wind calm enough to speak easily, we worked through a series of the best yes or no questions I could ask him.<p>

I learned that all dragon species he knew of could learn Norse(or any human language, for that matter), and could easily pick them up by living in close proximity to humans. Terrors were one of the few species that usually only had a basic grip on speaking, limiting most of their speech to incomplete sentences; though apparently Toothless had met a few that could speak Dragon(Dragonic? Dragonese? I wasn't sure what to call it) normally.

While understanding it was easy, Toothless knew of no dragons that could actually speak human languages. Considering the obvious differences between our mouths, I didn't find it that surprising that Dragons couldn't speak the same way we did. I also learned that humans were incapable of speaking the dragon's language, for obvious reason, but Toothless apparently had a story about that as well, once I could understand him a little better.

The time we spent in the sky felt like an instant, and before I knew it I was scribbling away in my journal as I hurried to the Mead Hall. Slamming shut my book and stuffing it into my inside pocket, I started sprinting up the stairs to the Hall, already ten minutes late. I shoved the door open wide (Not giving anyone an opportunity to repeat what happened yesterday) and quickly shut it behind me, grabbing a turkey leg and a cup of water from the cooks in the back. Making my way over to the others, I sat next to Gobber and as far from everyone else as I could. No one seemed to be paying attention to me other than the aging blacksmith, but I was too lost in thought to really notice.

"Oh, nice o' ya ta join tha party! Here I was thinkin' you were gonta be cleanin' me house today!" he joked, smacking me on the back. The other teens were chatting amongst themselves when Snotlout piped up.

"Hey Hic, don't get any of that turkey on the floor. I spent all of last night cleaning it and since I had to, I'm going to be reminding everyone what a good job I did. All day. For the next week." Snotlout was never exactly that funny or bright a person, but every once in a while he'd say something witty. I swallowed my mouthful of poultry and retorted.

"I won't get anything on your clean floor if you promise not to throw any more cutlery at me." He almost looked like he wanted to laugh, but instead just grumbled something along the lines of 'sorry about that,' under his breath. I took the apology, since it was about the best I expected out of him, and went back to my lunch. With the rest of the table busy with eating, Fishlegs spoke up when he noticed his chance.

"So, are w-we starting training tomorrow?" he asked, a small stammer in his voice. As I looked around the table I noticed that all of my peers, even Astrid, seemed tense about training. I was the only person at the table that seemed collected, which Gobber noticed immediately. His perplexed glance at me drew the attention of the others, leaving me feeling as tense as they all looked. Clearing my throat, I tried to answer Fishlegs' question to divert attention from me back to Dragon Training.

"I, uh, I don't think so. Dad's still not back yet, and he won't land in time to finish everything he has to do before we start training, so it won't be until Thor's Day," I looked at Gobber, who was eyeing me again. "Probably." Gobber shook his head and responded.

"Nonsense, lad! Tha' ship's gon' ta be in that 'arbor any minute now, jus' you see. It'll be on Odin's Day we enter tha' Kill Ring, an' don' you doubt it!" He said with a smirk and a gulp of his mead. He was wrong, and I had seen the proof of their delay myself. The

thought and Gobber's drinking caused an idea to pop into my head that was too good an option not to take advantage of, even if it wasn't the honest thing to do.

"I bet you they won't be back until sundown tomorrow, Gobber," I said, in a surprisingly commanding voice. The rest of the kids looked at me. Gobber laughed.

"Oh, we got ourselves a fiesty Hiccup today! Whacha gonta wager, tha' lil diary o' yours?" Snotlout and the twins laughed while Fishlegs looked embarrassed for me (even though I wasn't, myself). Astrid, on the other hand, almost seemed angry at Gobber for his little jab. I brushed it off as my imagination playing tricks on me and dropped it from my mind; my rigged bet with Gobber was more important right now.

"It's a book of notes and calculations for my machines, not a diary. Like my life is exciting enough to write about." It sounded like something I'd say before I met Toothless. Since I've known him that overgrown salamander had really gotten under my skin and made me feel a lot better about myself.

Taking a drink of water, I continued what I was saying. "If they come in after sundown tomorrow, I get full forge permissions and full privacy, no questions asked, for a week." Gobber considered this while looking at me critically. Slowly, he responded.

"Ya realize yer term fer losin' this 'lil bet o' yours is gonna have ta be pretty hefty for tha' one," he responded. I calmly nodded before speaking again.

"If they get here before sundown, I'll clean your house AND the forge, again. And I'll sharpen every weapon in your display rack, and polish them. I'll even knit you an entire set of new undies." The twins laughed out loud at my last point. "What? knitting's a useful tool-

"No, it's not that," Ruffnut interjected, in between laughs, gasping for air. Tuffnut continued while his sister caught her breath.

"We heard about you finding Gobber's underwear in the forge, so when Snotlout was forced to clean the hall last night..." He burst out laughing. Snotlout punched him in the face, making Tuff shout in pain. "OH GODS! My nose! My nose is so hurt! And it's my best feature! I'm gonna KILL YOU!" With that he dove on Snotlout, sending both of them to the floor. Before their fight managed to go anywhere, Gobber stood and kicked them both with his peg, picked them up off the floor and sat them back in their seats. With their little outburst over, I opened my mouth again.

"So you did what, exactly?" I asked as I grabbed a cup of water.

"THEY GAVE ME A BAG OF USED UNDERWEAR AND TOLD ME THEY WERE CLEAN RAGS!" Snotlout shouted. I immediately began choking on the water I was drinking, spilling most of it down my shirt as a result. Through the sputtering and hacking from the water I almost inhaled I still managed to cough out some laughter, much to the surprise of everyone in the Mead Hall.

Most of the villagers had never heard me laughing, but now they were all getting the full experience. I hadn't laughed so hard in years, if ever, and I was almost upset with myself for not thinking of what the twins did. Giving him the underwear myself would've made it even better, even if it probably would've earned me a black eye or two.

In between my raspy breathing I continued laughing, and the lack of air was making me light-headed. Losing my balance, I slipped off the side of the bench and hit the ground laughing, tears forming in my eyes. I couldn't talk or think; I could barely breathe. I stayed like that for several more minutes, laughing at Snotlout's expense as he likely began plotting some sort of revenge against me.

I finally managed to stop laughing, and after catching my breath I crawled back into the bench. I wasn't the only one laughing, I'd noticed, and even Snotlout had a slight grin on his face when I looked over to him. Feeling a bit bad about laughing at him (even though he'd done it to me for years) I tried to lighten the mood a little.

"Well Snotlout, if it's of any consolation, while I was convulsing in laughter on the floor, I couldn't help but notice that it looked absolutely beautiful. But I think I may have gotten a tear or two on it, so I'm sorry for that," I finished. To my astonishment, everyone at the table started laughing lightly, even Snotlout. It was odd, but I supposed it was the kind of bonding Gobber had been talking about. It did feel good, and I made a mental note to thank Toothless again later for rebuilding my confidence.

A hefty laugh came from my left as Gobber's voice echoed into his tankard arm. He was clearly feeling his drink, considering the incoherent mumbling he was doing into his partially-upturned tankard. He looked to me and winked, before completely upending his mead, drinking all of it before slamming his arm down to the table and letting out a loud belch. Looking satisfied, he turned to me and spoke.

"So, we agree on tha' terms o' yer bet, righ'? I'm lookin' forward ta seein' all me pretties lookin' all shiny and new. I can' wait!" I grinned a little, knowing that if Gobber ever found out about Toothless, he might be able to figure out I was basically cheating him. I had my reasons for doing it, though, so I didn't mind basically lying to him all that much. In true deal form, I shook his good hand to seal the bet with the other teens as witnesses. Once I had that forge to myself, I'd finally have the tools necessary to put my plan into action.

Diving back into my journal while slinking down a bit into it to keep prying eyes away, I heard Gobber mention something about finishing up a personal project at the smithy. We hadn't had a lot of fix requests since the last dragon raid, so we had more free time than usual. Finishing his mead, he got up and left. I heard Fishlegs stand up with Snotlout and the twins when someone called my name. I turned, realizing it was Astrid.

"So, now that they're gone, I have a question." She was still sitting at the table with me, right across from me now, eyeing me intently. I gulped.

"Yes?" I asked, in a less-than courageous voice. She cocked her head a little and responded.

"The odd bruises, the way you always vanish each day, and the fact that you caught a knife, which was actually pretty impressive, by the way. It all leads me to only one conclusion." My heart nearly imploded when she told me I'd impressed her, but more than that I was very curious and a bit worried as to what the conclusion she reached _was._

"A-And that is?" She smiled at my stammer, which struck me as out of place. Astrid smiling at me wasn't exactly commonplace.

"Who are you training with?" She asked, mostly stony-faced but still smiling. I leaned back a little in my seat and gave her the best confused look I could.

"Astrid, I'm not training with anyone. Like I told the others, it's just from working at the forge and s-swimming." I stammered as I finished, and she noticed. She even seemed to notice my wincing at the stammer, and the smile on her face began to slide away.

"Hiccup, no one just gets as good as you're getting as quickly as you have without some serious help. Even I would've had a hard time catching that knife, and I'm pretty sure Ruffnut's the only other one from our group that would have any chance at doing it. You're getting help from someone, and I wanna know who it is." The determined look set on her face revealed nothing. She meant exactly what she said, and she expected to get it.

"Why would you want to know? I mean, uh, training's only in a couple of days and that's not enough... Time. Yeah, there'd really be no reason to show you him." I didn't realize what I'd said until after it left my mouth. Cursing to myself, I wondered why for the love of Thor I'd always been so damn stupid around her. Looking over at Astrid, I noticed a victorious smirk across her face.

"So you ARE getting help. I want to see him, right now." She stood up.

"A-Astrid, wait! No, I can't- not yet-"

"Stop stammering. I want to see him." She looked angry now; very angry. "Let's get going." I sighed again, barely managing to compose myself. Standing up straight I looked at Astrid.

"The only way I can show you to him is if I know I can trust you. He's very protective of me, and the only way he won't attack you is if you and I seem to be on friendly terms." I looked her in the eyes, slowly alternating between the two. Despite being terrified of someone finding me out, I couldn't help but notice their luster again.

"So how are we gonna do that?" She responded.

"Simple. We leave this hall, go for a walk in the forest and have an actual conversation for once. No hitting or smacking or yelling or kicking. Just talking, like two normal people." I could tell she didn't quite like the idea of that, and something told me the situation was about to get worse considering what else I'd have to

tell her. "And don't bring your axe. He doesn't like seeing weaponry." Astrid immediately retorted.

"You want us to wander into the woods alone and unarmed? What are you, stupid?" I smirked at her.

"I've been called that. You can bring a dagger, just don't bring the axe. It'll freak him out and he'll see it as a betrayal of trust, so this is the only way you'll be finding anything out." Standing across the table from me, Astrid appeared to be in thought. Just as she was about to say something else, the door to the hall opened and Herja, Astrid's mother of all people, entered.

"Astrid? girl, come here, I have a few things I want done." Astrid was obviously none too happy about hearing the command, but considering it was her mother, she couldn't exactly say no. With a slight sigh she turned to Herja.

"How long is this going to take?" She asked. Her mother leaned to one side and put her hand on her hip.

"Lady, it doesn't matter how long it'll take, I'm your mother and you'll do it. But don't expect to be done until this evening. Now finish up eating and get to the house." With that, she turned and left. I looked back to Astrid, who was clearly upset about the turn of events.

"Well," I started, "It is only Moon's Day, and with training we'll see more of each other, so give it enough time and you'll get what you want. Probably. I'll have to pass it by him first, though." I knew I'd already mentioned it to Toothless, but I didn't want to show up unannounced with a stranger.

"Whatever. I'll see him eventually, one way or another." Astrid looked to the door and sighed. "Guess my afternoon is shot. Goodbye, Hiccup. I'll see you later." With a casual wave she turned and left.

* * *

><p>"...And then she actually gave me a polite goodbye and walked away. Crazy, huh?" I had, of course, immediately come to Toothless after I could break away from the crowd, and had just finished telling him the story. He wasn't too pleased with the idea of having to meet Astrid so soon, but I assured him it'd be fine.<p>

"She probably thinks you're some super old hermit Viking I found living in the woods somewhere and you're giving me secret techniques. I'm almost excited to see her reaction if I wasn't so afraid she'd try to kill me. Or worse, tell the village about you." Toothless laughed at the comment as I fastened the buckles of his harness. He made more gurgling sounds I couldn't quite make out.

"Anyway, bud, lets say we spend the rest of the day above the clouds. Ever since that storm moved in last night, I haven't seen the sun. And I don't know about you, but I wouldn't mind a little bit of it." Toothless crooned happily at me as I tried to figure out what he was saying. After listening to him for a little longer, I realized that the tone he always used around me must be what he called me in his tongue. The rest of the statement fell into place after

that.

"_Hiccup, quit thinking so much and get on._" I smirked, wondering how he'd react to my translation.

"Let me guess. That meant something along the lines of, 'Hiccup, quit thinking so much and get on'?" Toothless looked at me the same way he did when I kicked my dagger into the lake when we first met, then he started laughing again.

"Yeah, I'm catching on. Regardless, lets get going. I really wanna feel this today, and I wanna try that jump one more time." Toothless danced happily as I climbed on, and with a flick of my ankle, we were off again.

6. Learning to Speak Again

It was almost sundown before we landed. I'd been doing my best to understand Toothless' grumbling all day, and it was slowly getting easier. The sentences were still mostly broken and unintelligible, but the fact that I could more or less understand their meaning was a big step in the right direction.

Toothless was busy smacking around a fish he'd managed to pull from the lake while I sat and listened, trying my best to decipher what he was saying. I had my notebook open on my lap as I watched him, but didn't know how I'd go about writing down what his growling meant; putting a sound on paper wasn't exactly possible.

"_Slimy, slimy, wiggly thing. Stop bouncing!" _He whacked the fish around, purring in delight. _"Stupid fish... Can't... not in... water."_ The fish flopped a bit more before Toothless slapped it into a rock, where it twitched out one more faint wriggle before finally laying flat. _"Oops... Too much... Tasty."_

Toothless kept looking back at me and smiling as he played with his food, chattering away before finally swallowing the battered creature. He'd been going out of his way to vocalize ever since I asked about his language earlier in the day, and the barrage of Dragonese(as I've decided to call it) I'd been receiving since then was helping me sort out the details. In a way, it felt like I was back in the smithy on my first day as Gobber's apprentice. I had so many new things to experience and details to cover, and only one of me to try to deal with them all. It was a huge undertaking for one person, but I still felt compelled to forge ahead regardless.

I Looked down at Toothless, who had decided to curl up next to me after he finished knocking his snack around. I reached out and placed a hand on his head, running my fingers over his scales as my mind wandered. As I mindlessly dragged my fingers around the space between his eyes, my mind began wondering something else about Dragonese.

"Toothless, do dragons have a written language? Like my runes in this journal?" I showed him the journal again. He looked at it, puffed out some air dismissively and turned to me. He gestured to his paws and looked at me like I was an idiot. He rumbled again and his statement was crystal clear.

"_I don't have hands, genius."_ I looked at him and repeated his statement, word for word. He grumbled and smiled a little, and almost seemed impressed when I mentioned the word 'genius' in my translation. We hadn't used the word before, but for some reason I went with it.

"So what? The first major bonding day we had in this cove, you used an uprooted tree to draw all of those lines in the ground around me, so you could've done it that way. Not to mention, you have claws, and could easily scratch out stories with them in stone." Toothless grunted at me, responding.

"_We draw. We don't write."_ I repeated it, again, to make sure I understood him correctly. We'd been carrying on like this all day: I would repeat to him in Norse what he told me in Dragonese. The process had been working quite well, for the most part.

"Hm. Draw but don't write. I remember hearing stories about ancient human cultures using pictures instead of words as a 'written language' of sorts. Is it like that?" Toothless crooned at me, giving me a gummy smile.

"_Now you're getting it._" He stood up just as I did, and stretched out much the same. Laughing at our similar actions, I rubbed him on the head and spoke.

"Well, I have to get back into the town for a little while to grab another book and make an appearance. I was never this scarce in the village until I met you, and someone's bound to notice it eventually if I don't make an effort. Besides, as you can see, this journal's completely full," I said, flipping through the pages. Amongst descriptions, hastily scribbled thoughts and concepts, were all of my doodles and drawings. I liked to think I was pretty decent at drawing, not that I'd compare my ability with some of the artwork trader Johann often had for sale from the mainlands. They also weren't covered in words from the lack of space in a small journal, which helped.

I'd already filled two others before the current journal I had been using, and they were hidden under a floorboard in my room. With how little time I spent there, I kept a little reminder of where my previous journals were hidden in the room, written on the front page of the newest journal in my collection. I didn't care much if anyone found out where they were hidden, since my handwriting would keep most anyone from being able to read them, anyway. No, that hiding spot was only to protect them from getting lost in the cluttered mess that was my room.

Closing my journal and placing it back in my vest, I rubbed Toothless on the nose again before I spoke. "I'll see you a little later, Toothless, but I promise I'll be back. It is our last night together, after all." We looked at each other, both obviously not happy with the arrangements, but it wasn't as though we had much a choice.

"_I know. Go. Come back Later. I'll sleep."_ I wasn't sure if he was using incomplete sentences to make his statement more obvious to me, or if it was just the way I'd heard it;. After all, I was still getting used to understanding Dragonese.

"_Not really... Good enough._" I shrugged at his comment. Apparently

I had mistaken his exact wording, but at the very least, mistakes were considered the key to learning.

"Well, I can't get it right all the time; just means I have to work at it harder. I'll see you later then, Toothless." I finished rubbing his head and walked off as he groaned out a farewell.

* * *

><p>Walking through the forest and admiring my own drawings again, I heard footsteps coming off from my left. I quietly shut my journal and stuffed it away as I ducked behind a nearby tree. I had no interest in running into anyone this far from the village, especially the twins. They were really the only ones that would chase me through the forest when we were younger, and I still hadn't accepted that they wouldn't try something on me now.<p>

I slowly peered from my hiding spot toward where the footsteps had stopped only to see Astrid again, sitting on the ground nearby. Her back was leaning against a tree, and as she sat there I heard her cough a little, and then let out what sounded like a sniffle. My eyes widened as I listened; she sounded as though she was crying, but about _what?_ Right as the thought crossed my mind, my hand accidentally slipped on the tree it was gripping, and of course, she heard it.

"Who's there?" I heard her pick up her axe and start moving toward my tree without hesitation. I figured it'd be best if I showed myself and got it over with, because even if I could outrun her, she'd still know it was me. With a grimace on my face I popped out of my hiding place with my hands in the air.

"Don't- don't throw your axe! It's just me. I heard you coming and thought you were the twins, which is why I was hiding." I walked out completely from where I had been crouching, and we both looked at each other. I was marveling at her eyes, still beautiful and blue, but also a bit red. She certainly had been crying, but her voice didn't betray her as she spoke.

"Hiccup, why is your hair blown back like that?" My eyes opened entirely as I realized I'd forgotten about my hair. While normally tousled, it tended to slick back uniformly whenever I spent the day flying, and now was no different. I quickly began trying to ruffle it up again so it'd look more natural.

"That? That's, uh, it's nothing, nothing much. Just, running my hands through it a lot, you know. Plus, there's some cliffs with some good views nearby, but they're a bit, uh, windy." My mind was racing to cover my obvious lie when I noticed her shrug as she blankly stared at me.

"Oh, Alright. I'll see you later." She turned to walk away, but not before glaring at me. For once her expressions wasn't angry; it almost seemed hurt. This only confused me, and even began fueling more than a little bit of irritation with how she'd been acting around me. Against my better judgment, I stopped her from leaving so I could try getting some answers.

"Wait, Astrid. Can I ask you a question?" I asked, though my gut feeling said she wouldn't respond to it.

"What is it?" She turned with a sigh. The setting sun catching her entirely, I finally noticed how absolutely exhausted she looked. It made me wonder if the girl ever slept.

"What's wrong with you?" I quickly blurted out. She didn't like that.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Her familiar scowl was back again.

"I mean, why are you so run down and angry all the time? I never see you doing anything else but training in this forest. Do you even hang out with the other guys anymore?" I questioned her for once. Never a fan of prying eyes, she huffed and raised her voice a little.

"Keep in mind, you spend all of your time in the forest, yet you don't see me grilling you about spending time here instead of being out with friends." I saw a decent comeback, but it was a cheap shot and I knew it. Still, I decided to go with it, since I was sure it would pull the wind from her sails.

"Hey, at least you have friends you can confide in. All I have are these trees," I lied. I'd never been good at lying to the girl, but luckily I'd managed to do well with it so far. My response visibly shook her, and instead of deflating like I thought she would, she ran up to me and shoved me into a tree behind me, holding me in place by sticking her double-bladed axe up to my throat. I began regretting my choice of words as she spoke to me, angrily.

"Hiccup, they aren't my friends. I don't have any time to spend with them or anyone else, so I barely know them anymore. They're more like acquaintances than they are friends. I don't have anyone to talk to, so don't act like it's all about you, poor you, who doesn't have any friends. And here I am, forced to pick up your slack." I'd never seen her so angry, but my mind swiveled to her end statement.

"What do you mean by 'picking up my slack'?" I asked, in the calmest voice I possibly could considering the circumstances. It apparently caused something in her to snap, because she started screaming at me.

"WHY DO YOU CARE?! ALL YOU DO IS PISS AROUND THIS FOREST ALL DAMN DAY! I'M THE ONLY ONE OUR AGE ACTUALLY DOING ANYTHING TO TAKE ON THIS WAR!" Her outburst finally caused something about her to become clear. I can't fight; Snotlout's a moron and a braggart who talks big, but can't back it up; Fishlegs is book-smart, but is even more incompetent with a hammer than Snotlout is; Tuffnut isn't entirely useless, but he's not nearly as good as his sister; and while Ruffnut is second best to Astrid in capability, she isn't nearly close to being an equal. Astrid's behavior, her anger, her demands to know how I'd changed so much; it all made sense now.

"You feel like this entire war is going to be resting solely on your shoulders when we inherit it, don't you?" I asked, as nicely as I possibly could. If I'd never seen Astrid shocked, it had changed at that very moment. She put her axe down and said nothing. I continued. "Astrid, why don't you follow me? There's a field nearby that I've never seen anyone go near. We can rest in some tall grass, and instead of trying to ignore your problems, you can tell me about

them." She looked at me.

"Why should I tell you anything?" She spat. I could tell she was considering it, though.

"Because I'm not the rest of them. I'm not going to criticize you. I'll just listen. It'll help, I promise. Besides, you can't go on like this. If you keep pushing yourself like this, the only thing you'll be inheriting is an early grave." Bravely, and stupidly, I grabbed her hand, leading her to the field in question. She said nothing and tugged her arm out of my hand, but she was still following me.

* * *

><p>We were sitting across from one another in the same patch of grass I'd come to call 'Dragon Nip' due to its effect on dragons. Astrid wasn't speaking, so I decided to start us off.<p>

"So, what's up? Talk to me." I said it with a smile, trying to let her know I wanted to hear what she had to say. In truth, I really did; seeing her so upset was almost physically painful for me. She glanced away, but then slowly looked back at me. With a bit of hesitation, she finally spoke.

"A few months ago, I overheard your father talking to my parents about a message Gothi sent him. She not only decides the victor in our training, but as the village elder she has the power to choose a new chief if the current one dies or leaves no heir. In this case, I found out that she'd decided that if you couldn't prove yourself as a Viking in dragon training, the next heir would be Snotlout, but only if he can start showing leadership skills before he becomes an adult. Hiccup, Snotlout isn't a leader, and I'm sorry, but you're not going to do very well in dragon training because you can't fight at all and we both know it." She looked apologetic about basically insulting me, but I didn't take it as an insult. I'd never been capable with a weapon, and I couldn't deny it. But even with dragon training only a few days away, I had become all but certain that I wouldn't need to be. With a smile my motion for her to continue, Astrid took a breath and kept speaking.

"The next person in line to take over the village is me. Not only do I have to worry about dragon training, but if I become the village Chief I'll have to settle disputes, run dragon raids, marry couples and everything else that goes along with being a chief. I'll be expected to do all of that and still have a family of my own! On top of that I'm the one that has to carry our generation because NONE of my peers know how to fight properly! Hiccup, I'm not a leader, I'm a fighter! I can't do this and I have no one to turn to for help!" She honestly seemed to believe that all of our villages' problems were going to fall to her; that she was going to have to face all of this alone. I needed to calm her down, and wincing at what might happen, I grabbed her hands in mine and looked her in the eyes.

"Astrid, please, settle down. You won't have to do this alone, and I doubt you'll have to be the chief of the village, either. I have a 'guy' in the woods, remember? I'm learning. Mark my words, dragon training will not be what you're thinking once I gather my bearings and start using what I've been taught in a real situation." I said it

with as much determination and focus as I possibly could. Truthfully, I had my own doubts about my odds, but that was for me to worry about, not her. I tried to act strong, to ease her mind, though I didn't quite think it would work. To my surprise and relief, it did; she seemed to calm down immediately, looking me in the eyes again.

"Honestly? Your training is going that well?" She sounded almost impressed and a lot less worried, though not entirely at ease. "What weapons do you use? Oh! Do you know of any secret weak spots that dragons have? And can I meet this old hermit of yours, finally? Please?" None of her questions really had any answers, so I just put up a hand as I broadened my smile.

"Astrid, like I said, I can't show you him unless I know I can trust you. Because... Well..." I searched for a reason. I couldn't tell her the truth, since I knew she wouldn't believe me. Either that, or she'd run off immediately. Suddenly, I thought of a decent story to feed her. "Astrid, the guy's, uh... He's pretty old, and he's also my best friend. My only friend in seven years, actually. But he's also... He's also an Outcast. And if I tell you where he is and you backstab me, the village will go to where he's hiding and kill him, and it'll be like my mother dying all over again-" my thoughts, what I was saying, and my ability to move all stopped at once. Astrid had reached forward and hugged me, and all I could do was sit there and hope my heart didn't seize.

"Hiccup," she choked out. It sounded like she was crying again. "I'm so sorry I told you I hated you that day. I'm sorry I ever even thought it. I didn't even remember it was the same day your mom died." Her grip on me tightened, and if not for my ribcage my heart would have probably fired straight out of my chest in response; I just hoped she couldn't tell. "So, so sorry. And I'm sorry for ignoring you all these years. I never made fun of you because I felt terrible for you, but I... I wasn't strong enough to stand up for you. I've never hated you, Hiccup. I just wish you weren't so weak and prone to making mistakes. But if I had been there..." I wrapped my hands around her back. She couldn't blame herself for my mistakes. They were mine, dammit. They made me who I was, and for once I'd realized I kinda liked that.

"Astrid, I'm still Hiccup. Even if the two of us had remained friends for the last seven years, I'd still be the village screw-up because the only way I know how to fight dragons is with my contraptions, and their misfirings were all my fault. And partially the village's fault, because if dad and the rest of them had just let me test those things in the forest first, I could've hammered out the kinks... But that's not important. I got rid of all of those contraptions. I burned their blueprints. I don't need those weapons. All I need is my brain, and to be me. And I wouldn't know that without Toothless." I winced after his name left my mouth. I hope she'd take it as a believable name, since I hadn't planned on dropping it at all before they met, assuming it ever happened. I let go of her as she let go of me, and as she leaned back I noticed her staring me down with a cocked head and a raised eyebrow.

"Toothless? Your mentor's name is... Toothless?" She grinned, and then started laughing a little. I was hit with a wave of happiness from hearing the sound; it wasn't much, but it was definitely a step in the right direction.

"Heh, yeah. He has a weird name, but he's deadly, I assure you." She actually smiled at me. I hadn't seen a legitimate smile on her face for years.

"When... When can I meet him? I swear I won't tell the village since he's an Outcast. I mean it. And I'll leave my axe at home." She looked excited about the prospect, but I still had a twinge of doubt on my mind. But I had an idea, and a good one, at that.

"Look, lets go back to the village and grab something to eat at the Mead Hall. I've got to pick something up from my house, and then I'll go down and ask Toothless for permission. I'll meet you at the torches in the town's square at ten o'clock tonight to tell you his answer. If he says yes, we'll go meet him. If not, well, I'll keep asking him until he says yes. But in that case it might not be for a few days. Is that alright with you?" I put my hand on her shoulder pad. Not looking at me, she nodded.

"Yeah, that's fine. I'll drop my axe off at home and meet you at the Mead Hall for dinner with the others. After that I'll be waiting by the torches at ten. I hope he says yes." With that, she stood up and reached out a hand, which I assumed was to pick up her axe. But when she stopped and looked at me, I realized she was offering to help me up. I took her offer, and after pulling me to my feet she grabbed her axe and heaved it over her shoulder.

"Thanks," I said, as I brushed myself off. Having a normal conversation with another person was a lot nicer than I thought it'd be.

"You're welcome, Hiccup. Now come on, lets get going. It's already dark and getting darker, so we'll probably have some problems navigating the forest if we don't get moving." I laughed.

"Astrid, I've been basically living with Toothless since my dad left for Helheim's gate. Besides that, I've been wandering these forests alone since I was a kid. I could get back to Berk with my eyes closed." She looked at me, almost astonished, as we started heading back.

"You've been living in the forest with this guy for over a month? You trust him that much?" She sounded surprised. "I mean, if he's an Outcast, he must've done something horrible, right? how do you know you can trust him?" This seemed like a good way to start easing her into the idea that she might be wrong about her assumptions.

"Just because he's an Outcast doesn't mean he's a bad person. And we don't talk about why everyone in Berk would want to kill him if they saw him, because it doesn't matter. I'd trust Toothless with my life, and I do, every day. He's even saved it a few times." I thought back to our first few flying lessons, and how I'd almost fallen to my death from the saddle on more than one occasion. Every time, he caught me.

"He really must be your best friend, then..." Her voice trailed off, and I had a feeling I knew where it was going.

"Astrid, stop feeling guilty. You can't change the past, but you can make the future better. You're strong, fierce and determined. Not

all... This." I pointed at her.

"You just gestured to all of me." Her familiar response was deliberate, and it made me smile. I'd never been on the receiving end of that statement before now.

"Yes, I did. Now, if the person you were a few weeks ago could see you now, what would she say?" I waited for her response as she huffed and looked up at the sky.

"She'd punch me in the jaw and tell me to buck up." And there it was. Astrid finally seemed to be getting closer to normal, just in time for our arrival at the village. "I should head home for a bit, too. I'll see you in the hall." I nodded and turned toward my own home.

"Alright. I'll see you in a few minutes, Astrid." I spoke as I began to walk away, but she grabbed my shoulder before I was out of arm's reach. Apparently she had something more to say.

"And Hiccup?" She moved her bangs from in front of her left eye as she smiled at me. "Thank you. Really. I needed that." With those words, she gave me an even wider smile and ran off.

I stumbled lightly as I made my way up the steps to my house. Once inside, I fought the urge to fall to the ground again, sprinted up the stairs, stashed my third journal and grabbed a fresh book. I jotted down which panel the journals were hidden beneath, stuffed the book in my bearskin vest and ran out the door to the Mead Hall for dinner. As I headed to the hall, I couldn't help but hope that Astrid would stick to her word when she eventually found out that Toothless wasn't actually a hermit, or an Outcast. Because if not, and another one of my stupid ideas were to fall apart, I'd be shipped off as an Outcast myself.

7. Gaining an Ally

It was a funny thing; I might have felt a bit off about cheating Gobber like I had, but I still couldn't help but smirk at the scowl he had on his face as we sat there, eating. My father still hadn't returned, and as long as he was still as far from Berk as I knew he was, then Gobber had to honor our bet. But while he was none too pleased they still hadn't come back, he hadn't entirely given up hope.

"Wipe tha' smirk off yer face, boy. You'll be cleanin' me undies this time tomorrow, an' ya know it." I just smiled a little more, then looked at him.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure. A little blackbird told me they hit the bulk of that storm we had last night." Gobber just looked at me and scowled.

"Some li'l storm ain' gonna stop a boatfulla Vikings, laddie." I shrugged at him in response.

"We'll see. Anyway, I'm gonna get going. See you all tomorrow." I stood, glancing at Astrid, who had been watching our bit of back and forth. I nodded lightly, scanned my eyes over the rest of them and

laid them back on Gobber. "Keep the forge warm for me, won't you?" I said, patting him on the back as I walked by and out of the Hall.

I knew I was pushing this newfound courage of mine a bit far, and I still felt really strange doing it, but I couldn't help myself. What made it even better was the look on Gobber's face when I finished with the comment: eyes wide and staring at nothing, mouth slightly agape; I considered drawing it later on, assuming I had the time.

Using the less-traveled paths in the village, I managed to reach the forest's edge with only a few people taking notice of me. I doubted they'd bother caring where I was going or why, but I still made sure to casually stroll my way between the trees until the thicket was dense enough to block my view of Berk. Satisfied no one could be looking, I bolted for the Cove.

* * *

><p>On average, the time it took to walk from the back door of my house to Toothless Cove was about half an hour. Sprinting there the way I did down the usual path only took me about ten minutes, even if the time felt considerably longer with how hard I was pushing myself. Regardless of the pain, it was by and far a record for me, which felt good.<p>

Quickly sliding in through the usual entrance, I stumbled over to the shallow end of the lake and collapsed into a comfortable-looking patch of grass next to it. The idea of crawling into the water entered my mind as I lay there panting, but at that moment the thought of doing anything but breathing made my chest ache even harder.

Most likely drawn by my unusual entrance, Toothless approached and quickly licked my face, per his usual greeting. The slobber, while fishy and disgusting, was for once a welcome addition with how cool it felt. Satisfied with his greeting, Toothless proceeded to spread his wings and start pumping them, whipping up the air around us and cooling me down even further. It was a wonderful sensation on my overheated body, and yet another reminder of how useful having a dragon around really was.

A few more minutes of Toothless cooling me down was all I needed to pull myself to my feet and stumble over to the lake, where I quickly dunked in my head and upper body. He went off to his usual spot by the pit as I pulled myself from the lake and stretched back up into a mostly standing position.

Toothless re-ignited the blackened logs in the fire pit as I made my way to him, throwing on a bit more wood before hanging up my soaked clothing. I grabbed a spare tunic from the den and took a seat against Toothless' lying form as he tended the fire. Now that I was finally calmed down and relaxed, it was time to talk.

"So, bud. Thanks again for your help earlier." Toothless turned his head as he focused his yellow eyes onto my own. "Yep, and thanks for the fire, too. As always. But anyway, uh... Toothless, I have a proposal of sorts for you." He cocked his head to one side and flicked his ears about as he rumbled at me.

"_What is it, Hiccup?_" I recognized the noise that meant me again.

"Well you see, Toothless, I ran into Astrid on my way back to the village. Some 'things' happened that may or may not have involved her axe, but in the end I managed to calm her down and actually talk to her for a while." Toothless huffed a bit of air from his nostrils and vocalized again.

"_So? What did she tell you?_" Yes or no, I had to tell Toothless everything if I wanted his approval. That is, everything from the point just _after_ Astrid had me pinned to a tree with her axe at my throat. I figured omitting that bit of the story would avoid any more unnecessary complications.

"_So you want... bring her here?_" I was still spotty on my translation, but I understood enough of it.

"Yeah. She'll only have a dagger on her, and she promised me that she wouldn't tell anyone about you. The only problem is, like I said, she doesn't know you're a dragon. But she said she'd keep it a secret, and I want to believe her." Toothless stared at me blankly, making it apparent he wasn't as willing as I was to believe.

"_Good luck..." _I couldn't make out the rest, but I got what he meant.

"Look, I know how it sounds, but even if I master this Dragonese and can prove we've been wrong about dragons, this is going to be almost impossible to do without help. Not to mention even with proof there's little chance most anyone would believe me other than... Well, my 'group,' if you can call them that. But I'll need her if I'm going to get them on my side at all." Toothless continued staring at me, leaving us in silence save for the crackling of the fire.

"_What if she betrays us?_" That I understood immediately. Toothless used that sound a lot when talking about my village.

"If I can't convince her, she'll tell the village. At the very least, I'll be banished from the clan and you'll be killed. I'm sure we'd both rather avoid that, so if she manages to get away, we're going to leave. We'll figure out what to do from there, if it comes to it." Crackling silence overtook us again. I had no reason to think she wouldn't turn on me, but it was a necessary risk. I couldn't just tell her without her thinking I was either joking or completely crazy, so I'd have to show her.

"_This is a terrible idea._" Toothless face was expressionless, staring blankly at nothing.

"Yeah I know, but it doesn't matter how we approach this. We can ease her into it as much as we want, it's still not going to change the fact that Vikings and Dragons have been at war for the last three hundred years," I stated simply. "She's used to assuming dragons are all just mindless killers, and we need to break that somehow. I'm not entirely sure it'll work no matter what we do, but there _might_ be something you could do about that..." I looked at him, a smirk growing on my face. Toothless' expression slowly shifted to that of disapproval as he realized what I was getting at.

"_I'm __**not**__ going to act like a kitten in front of her._" This I understood clearly, mostly because I'd seen it coming.

"Your pride, I get it. Look, if we play the cute angle and it works, I'll let you make her eat half a fish. I know you only did that to me back then because you wanted to see if I'd actually do it, and knowing her, she won't be able to say no. I'm sure you'll get a kick out of it," I finished, hoping it might be enough to convince him.

As we sat there in the dark, a faint bell sounded off in the distance. The village timekeeper had rung out for nine at night, leaving us with only 30 minutes to work with. Our time was up and Toothless would have to choose, one way or the other.

"_Deal._" I let out a breath of relief and smiled a little at him, grateful he'd accepted on such short notice.

"Alright. I'll give you another brush down and then I'll put on your gear. How does that sound?" Toothless's ears perked up at the mention of his favorite brush, and within moments of not wanting to act like a kitten, he stood up and began bounding around like... Well, like a kitten. It started my mind thinking while I pulled out his gear and brush.

"Toothless, just how old are you, anyway? And... How long do dragons normally live?" This, I was actually afraid of. Would I lose my best friend early in my life, or would he have to live for a long time without me? He purred happily, cutting through my worried thoughts with something I clearly understood.

"_Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere._" The sound itself was reassuring enough, and would've been even if I hadn't understood it. It was for the best; I couldn't reliably talk with him about much of anything until I had a better grasp on his language. Then again, I'd apparently been unconsciously translating it for a while now, so maybe it'd happen sooner than later.

* * *

><p>Nearly an hour later, I was standing at the forest's edge, just far enough out of town to be relatively unnoticeable, but close enough to see the torches of the town square. I'd been there for the last ten minutes, mentally preparing myself for what I was about to do. However, no matter how I looked at it, it was bad. It was beginning to remind me of getting tied to a Thorforsaken tree, that's how amazing a 'plan' it really was.<p>

Still, I had to do something, no matter how hopeless it seemed. I gave out a sigh, turning my attention back to my newest journal, which was already covered in notes about Dragonese. I had a good feeling that Toothless and I were about to break this language barrier completely, giving me access to a much larger range of information. During those notes I occasionally drew a bit more of Astrid and I riding Toothless, a picture that had graced every single journal I'd written in so far. Glancing back up, I noticed her waiting for me under one of the torches. I closed my journal and locked it in place on my rider's vest, stood, and made my way over to her.

"Astrid!" I whispered loudly as I hurried up to her. She took a quick look at my riding vest and raised her eyebrows. She looked as though she might start laughing.

"Hiccup..." She began, obviously fighting a grin and a chuckle. "What are you wearing that thing for?" I might've been mad at her for laughing at me if it wasn't so cute.

"It's... Training gear. At least, what it's for should be obvious later. Now come on, lets go. I don't want anyone to notice us." She nodded and quickly followed me into the woods.

* * *

><p>I decided to take a more indirect route to the cove, just in case someone had tried to follow us. Astrid said nothing, though, so I had a feeling we really were alone. We'd also been walking for five minutes in dead silence, the only sound being the 10 o'clock bell sounding off as we entered the trees. Tensely, Astrid spoke.<p>

"So, this Toothless guy... is he really that good?" I smiled a little at the comment, since it meant she was just as ready to talk about this as I was. However, I most certainly had a much different reason for wanting to.

"Oh yeah, he's the best. I've definitely never met anyone like him before." I talked as casually as I could about the dragon, trying very hard to not let my nerves get the best of me.

"I see... So, do you think he might be able to teach me anything?" I nodded as the thought 'you have no idea' passed my mind.

"I really hope so. He's definitely not your usual teacher, but with any luck, he'll get through to you." I waited for a response or something to go off of to keep the conversation afloat, but Astrid stayed quiet. Once more the forest's sounds overtook the evening.

"Well," she piped up finally, "hopefully he will." The leaves crunching under our feet were about the only thing interrupting what felt like a very heavy coat of awkward silence.

"Yeah..." My voice trailed off as I scratched the back of my head; talking to this girl was too difficult at times, and for no reason, at that.

"Is there anything that can you tell me about him? About his techniques? What weapons has he taught you to use?" I managed to smile at her assumptions despite feeling so tense. Hopefully having something to actually talk about would help soothe my nerves.

"Only one. My brain," I responded. She looked at me questioningly. "Toothless hasn't taught me how to fight; rather, he's taught me how to not need to fight. He's quite certainly opened my eyes about all... This," I gestured to myself. "But he's also helped me with my focus, speed, balance, and reaction time, to name a few things. The rest has to come from me." She looked at me, astonished; a look I seldom saw on her.

"So he gave you the tools you needed without directly telling you

what to do? He must be good if he can do that..." Astrid trailed off with her sentence, putting us back in the same quiet as before. She looked up through the tree branches to the stars, which were still just barely visible through the overcast sky. The clouds looked indecisive; bloated enough to rain, but still holding off save for a few sprinkles. In a way they reminded me of the conversation Astrid and I were barely having: a few words, but nothing with any weight behind it. I started hunting in my head for the right things to say when Astrid yawned and then casually began speaking.

"Ugh... Damn clouds. You know, I've never really mentioned it to anyone, but I like looking at the stars. There's so many of them all over the sky at night; more than you could ever count. Sometimes I stare at them when I can't sleep."

"Really?" I laughed a little, which I noticed brought a smile to her face. "The tough and ruthless Astrid likes to stargaze? what made you bring that up?" I asked in earnest.

"Well, you're in that goofy looking outfit, and for some reason it made me wanna tell you something about myself. That vest is personal to you, and if you're showing it to me, then I feel like I should let you in on something about me; It's only fair." I never imagined I could have an effect like that on Astrid, and it definitely helped liven the mood I was in.

"And Toothless. We can't forget about him, either. He's my closest companion, and I've never let anyone else in on his existence. But I'm trusting you here, Astrid. You gave me your word that you wouldn't tell the village about him and I know you can be true to it. But please, Astrid, please don't make me regret this. This is the most important thing in the world to me. I would do anything for Toothless, and I don't want to have to worry about him getting hurt." Her expression went from blank to concerned, then inquisitive.

"Hiccup... Just who is this Toothless, really? Why would an old hermit be so important to you?" With my mind on other things, her question hung unanswered in the air. We were closing in on the entrance to the cove, meaning that I'd soon be introducing my best friend, who was a dragon, to the girl I loved, who hated them.

"He's not an old hermit. He's... Not at all what you're expecting."

"Don't you mean 'who I'm expecting'?"

"No." She looked at me questioningly, again, but I just gestured forward to a hole in the rock wall in front of us. We walked through it, coming out on the other side with a bird's eye view of the cove. The few moments in which the clouds overhead parted enough to let the moon shine through, it bathed the lake and most of the rest of the cove in a glimmering sliver light.

"It's beautiful," Astrid stated next to me, echoing my own thoughts. Breaking my eyes from the sight, I led her down the rocky path to the floor of the cove. We passed through the boulders that lined the cove wall, emerging just in front of the lake as I had earlier.

"This is Toothless Cove, Astrid. This is where Toothless lives and

sleeps, and where he and I have lived for the last month. I've had a lot of fun learning about him, studying him, playing with him... I've even taught him a thing or two. Over time, we've become very close companions." I watched her as I spoke. Astrid was glancing around for Toothless, her hand lightly resting where her dagger was.

"Hiccup, you're talking like this Toothless is some sort of animal..." I could tell she was making some connections, and I was curious if her thoughts would lead her back to a month ago. Unspeaking, I just keep smiling at her, and she gulped. "Hiccup, Toothless isn't human, is he?" I grinned even wider. Very bright, this one.

"...No, He isn't. He also isn't dangerous, and he's as playful as a kitten." Astrid's eyes widened even more as I spoke. She'd figured it out, hadn't she?

"...You really did shoot that N-Night Fury down during the last raid... Didn't you?" She looked like she might pass out, so I continued with the warm smile I'd been wearing, hoping it might help the situation.

"Yes. I know, Astrid, this sounds crazy. But you promised me you wouldn't tell anyone about him, and like I said, I believed you. I trusted you. Now please, trust me. You have no idea what it's like. Let me show you... Please, Astrid." I stood there in front of her, in the shadow of a large outcropping of boulders blocking the view of the lake behind me. I held out my hand, beckoning her to walk to me, begging her to hear me out. I didn't think she was listening at this point, but I kept on smiling anyway.

"Have... Have you flown on him?" The question seemed almost hopeful, which made my eyes widen, if only just. I wasn't expecting to hear that.

"I have been for weeks now." She kept looking at me, not saying anything. "If you want, you can wear the harness so you don't fall off. But it's not really necessary, since he won't let you fall off. Just trust us." My hand remained held out.

"Only you, Hiccup. Only someone like you would be this stupid." Astrid closed her eyes, shook her head and breathed out, hard. Reluctantly, she put a foot forward. "Put down your hand, alright? I'm not going anywhere." I did as she said as she walked up to me, stopping at about arm's length. "I can't believe I'm about to say this, but let me... Let me see him."

"You're basically looking at him already. Toothless? This is Astrid, my friend." Behind me, from the boulders I was next to, came a distinctly happy rumble. Toothless opened his bright yellow-green eyes and focused them directly at Astrid, pupils dilated. From the look she was giving to the area just above me, I had a feeling it was an eerie sight: fist-sized eyes seemingly just floating in the darkness, Toothless's body disguised by the night.

Astrid stepped back in shock so quickly she fell backwards, but she didn't get up to run; She just stared at him. Without looking back, I put my hand up. Toothless bumped it, purring even louder. I could feel it running down my arm.

"Hiccup, you're touching a dragon." I would have laughed if I wasn't still so afraid she was about to run off.

"I know. And like I said, he won't hurt you." I pulled my hand from Toothless' snout, walked forward and held out my other hand to help her up. She took it and stood, still not taking her eyes off of Toothless.

"It really is a good thing I didn't bring my axe. Hiccup, you're absolutely insane. That is a dragon, Hiccup. A dragon. You're trying to get me killed." I kept her hand held, trying to calm her.

"Astrid, my mother was killed by dragons. If I've managed to forgive them for that, there has to be a good reason to." I moved directly into her line of sight, blocking Toothless from view.

"We're about to have a very long conversation, aren't we?" Astrid responded. I grinned and laughed a little.

"Of course, but first I have to introduce you two officially. And remember: Don't touch your dagger, treat him with respect, and," I handed her a fish, "give him this. It's considered a peace offering from one dragon to another to share food." Food truces between dragons was a phenomenon I'd learned of from talking with Toothless, who had already made his way up next to me.

"Don't tell her about the next part." I tried hard not to smile. I knew I shouldn't be looking forward to this, but for some reason I was. Ever since I'd actually gone through with it, it seemed more funny than disgusting, even if it was still disgusting.

As I backed out of the way, she slowly approached Toothless, fish extended outward. As we agreed, he happily jumped over to her and wrapped his gums around the fish, gently pulling it from her grasp and immediately slicing it in half with those hidden razor-sharp teeth of his. Licking his lips, Toothless retracted his teeth and gave Astrid a gummy smile before bumping his snout into her stomach like an overgrown dog. She was startled, but not frightened.

"Well, that explains the name... Toothless... Heh."

"Go ahead and put your hand on his head," I told her. She did so, and right when she did her eyes lit up. She must've felt exactly what I had been feeling earlier: the deep, constant rumble that emanated from Toothless whenever he was happy. It was extremely loud, and Astrid seemed completely blown away by it.

"This is... Actually amazing. But do you have any idea how many problems this is going to cause, Hiccup? You and Toothless... This changes everything." I went and stood next to her as I scratched Toothless' ear.

"I know, and with that in mind I'm going to need your help. We need to convince this island that dragons aren't the real threat here. And yes, I know how that sounds, which is why we have to start with the other trainees."

"The real threat? What do you mean by that?" She pulled her hand off of Toothless' snout, gently, and turned to me.

"No, not now; we'll have plenty of time for questions when we get into the air. Yes, we're going to fly. But first..."

"_On second thought, I like this girl. She doesn't get the fish."_ There was no way I could translate that without it sounding intentional. I quickly turned my attention on Toothless, much to Astrid's surprise.

"What? You mean to tell me I had to take a bite out of half of a regurgitated fish and swallow it for you to trust me, but you're not gonna put her through the same thing?" Astrid was now staring at me, mouth slightly agape.

"_Yes. Because the way you look right now is funny._"

"Oh, that's wonderful," I started, crossing my arms in mock anger. "So I'm a tool for your amusement? Thanks for nothing, you useless reptile." Toothless lightly smacked the back of my head with his tail, his rumbling getting a bit louder. Astrid was still staring, but I wasn't paying much attention to her at the moment.

"_Oh, lighten up, you hairless ape. I only give an offering like that to my Bond-Brother, anyway."_ Confusion now evident on my face, Toothless continued. "_It's an old dragon term to describe my Rider. And that would be you."_ My eyes widened a little in surprise. Bond-Brother? Sure, it sounded rather dated, but it wasn't terrible.

"Hiccup, what the Hel are you doing? You're starting to worry me. And that's even considering the fact that you're hiding a dragon from the village." The concern in Astrid's voice focused my thoughts back to our conversation. I didn't want her thinking I was crazy, but at least Toothless's antics would help me bring up the other big subject we had to talk about.

"Sorry about that, but I'm feeling fine, really."

"_Are you? because it sounds like your heart's trying to beat its way out of your chest."_

"Are you? Because it sounds like you're talking to a dragon and expecting a response." I couldn't help but grin when she said that, with how similar it was to Toothless's comment.

"I'm not expecting responses from Toothless, Astrid." I put my hand on the dragon's head, and he began rumbling as he usually did. "I'm getting them." She stared at us in silence.

"...Okay, Hiccup. Listen to me." Astrid calmly placed her hands on my shoulders, slipping my hand from Toothless and making my heart leap. "It's one thing to catch, tame and ride a dragon. It's another thing entirely to think they can talk, especially when he's not making any words." She glanced over to Toothless, who was staring at her and obviously grinning. "I think all the time you've spent out here has been making you delirious."

"_And I think this entire conversation is hilarious."_

"I know you do," I answered both of them, "but you, Astrid, are

wrong. Just because he's not using words doesn't mean he can't speak. Isn't that right?" I glanced over to Toothless, who nodded through his gummy smile. Astrid noticed, and her hands slipped from my shoulders. "And besides, how is this any more unbelievable than anything else I've shown you so far?"

"No. No no no no. Training a dragon is way more believable than thinking they can talk. You hold on just one second, Hiccup, because I'm taking a page out of your book. We're going to test this." Astrid grabbed my shoulders again and directed me to the lake. "You stay here and cover your ears. I'm going to tell your dragon something and I want see if you can tell me what it is." Accepting her test, I covered my ears and waited for Astrid to tap my shoulder. She came back a few minutes later and punched it instead, which I should've seen coming.

"So, Toothless..." Astrid still looked a bit nervous, but still managed to approach the dragon and place a hand on his snout. "Would you please tell Hiccup what I told you?" Toothless nodded again, making Astrid pull her hand away. There was a glint in his yellow eyes as he turned to me, grinning.

"_She thinks you're kinda cute._" My eyes shot open wide and I hit the floor.

"YOU THINK I'M CUTE?!" I screamed in exclamation. Astrid turned red and covered her mouth as Toothless started laughing.

"I DID NOT TELL HIM THAT!" She screamed at me. I turned to Toothless, scowling.

"TOOTHLESS! This is supposed to be serious!" He just kept laughing. I almost couldn't stay mad at him. Almost.

"_Oh, calm down! I'm just having a little fun with you two. Her favorite color is green and when she was a kid she wished she could have a pet Nadder._" The first part sounded legitimate, but the second half absolutely confused me.

"A pet Nadder?" I looked at Astrid. "And your favorite color is green, by the way. But a pet Nadder? Really? I thought you'd always hated dragons." She didn't immediately respond to my statement, staring blankly at me.

"You... You can talk to dragons. Okay then." She looked to Toothless. "Okay. I'm gonna need some time... A lot of time to digest this." She stood there, looking lost as to what she should be doing. "But I guess I can do that when I go home, because I kinda really..." She took a few steps closer to Toothless, "...Can we fly? Can he really support both of us?"

"Definitely," I eagerly stated. I was wondering if she'd need any prodding to get her on the dragon's back, but she seemed ready to motivate herself to do it. She did have a knack for jumping at a challenge.

"Well then... Fine. Lets get this guy into the air before I have a chance to regret it." I'd never seen someone looking both terrified and utterly excited at the same time. It was a strange combination, but I couldn't help but think Toothless had seen it on my face as

well.

I jumped on to Toothless's back and hooked myself in. I held out my hand to Astrid and waited for her to take it. Slowly, she did, but she jumped high enough into the saddle that my help wasn't really necessary.

Once she was firmly in her seat, she put her arms around me. I locked up a little from the closeness but, with how clearly I could feel her shaking, did my best to ignore it. In an attempt at reassuring her I ran one of my hands over hers.

"It'll be okay. You'll be scared at first, especially when we get above the clouds. But once you're over that, it's a pretty amazing feeling." She nodded against my back, saying nothing. I clicked my heel into place, and we launched into the air with the usual jump. Considering how she began screaming behind me, perhaps a gentler liftoff would've been a better idea.

A few minutes after getting into the air, her screaming slowly transitioned to laughter. Once I'd heard that, I had Toothless take our speed up a notch and yelled at Astrid to hold on tight. We took a sharp dive, fell for a moment and then shot straight back up into the air. It was as though Astrid was responding in two different ways at once, both laughing and screaming. I could wholeheartedly understand the feeling, considering my own reactions to the acrobatics.

We carved through the overcast skies, peaking over the clouds and basking in the silver glow of the full moon. The sky was dotted with stars, and like many of the nights Toothless and I spent flying, you could see the northern lights above and all around us. Behind me I could hear Astrid marveling at the sight, her head slowly sinking to one of my shoulders. It was a good thing Toothless didn't need my assistance to glide, because my brain all but shut off in that moment.

We eventually sunk back below the clouds, coming out just over Berk as I'd intended. Astrid's head slipped from my shoulders as she looked down, seemingly as taken by the sight of a tiny Berk as she was flying through the dancing lights above.

"Is that really home?" I heard Astrid yell from behind me. "It looks so small. Like it's just a tiny model of the village." Thinking back to the first time I flew on Toothless, I grinned at her comparison.

"I said the exact same thing to Toothless when he and I first came up here. Successfully, at least. It took a while before we got it down right." I laughed a bit at it now, since it felt so alien to think there was a time where I had difficulties flying with Toothless.

"What do you mean?" I heard her say. "It's a Night Fury, Hiccup. There's no way you could've had so many problems in the beginning!" Her comment sent guilt coursing through my veins, though I knew I shouldn't be feeling it. With a sigh, I turned my head a bit to look at her.

"The night I shot Toothless down, the bola I fired at him ripped off his left tailfin. Without me, he can't fly." I said it blankly, and

didn't hear anything from behind me for a few seconds. She tightened her grip around me just slightly for a moment and responded.

"I'm sorry for bringing it up, Hiccup, but there's so much I still don't know." She pulled her hands from around my waist, obviously very comfortable on Toothless at this point, and placed them on my shoulders.

"Well, then I suppose it's time to start talking. And to do that we'll need to be gliding a bit more slowly so the wind isn't so loud. Hang on." I clicked my heel forward, and with a slight lurch we were flying back up into the clouds. We crowned out of them and Toothless started gliding very slowly, enough for us to actually talk. Astrid returned her arms to my waist and rested her head on my shoulder, marveling yet again at the sight of the night sky.

"Yeah. Why don't you start from the beginning, Dragon Trainer?" I smiled, noticing my head slowly resting against hers; a movement I had nothing to do with. With a sigh I began to speak.

* * *

><p>"So, any questions? I mean, big ones?" I asked Astrid. We were still in the air, gliding around aimlessly over the smattering of islands that dotted the ocean between Berk and Helheim's Gate. In the time that had passed since I started explaining things to her, the clouds had begun to thin out and the winds calmed.<p>

"I don't think so, but it's still a lot to take in. Especially the whole you-talking-to-dragons thing. And how did you manage to learn an entire language in two days?" I laughed a bit, still not sure of how I'd done that, myself.

"I don't know, but maybe I'm just a fast learner. It would make being chief a lot easier."

"No kidding. But back on subject, Hiccup, the dragons do still raid us, even if you befriended one. Do you have any idea how we can stop that without fighting them?" I nodded, since I had a feeling I knew what the answer was already.

"I think I know why they raid us. And I don't think they do it willingly." Astrid sat in silence, so I continued. "Every time Toothless and I go near Helheim's Gate, there's a deep, distant rumbling sound that echoes out of it. The other Vikings don't notice it, but since I understand the language, I do. There's something there, Astrid. And it seems to terrify all dragons. Even Toothless," I pointed out, who begrudgingly shook his head in agreement.

"How can you be so sure that's causing the raids, though?" Astrid did have a point, since I couldn't exactly prove anything without going to the nest myself. But we still had some evidence for it, regardless.

"I can't be without going to the island myself and taking a look around, but it's not like I'm just guessing. There's something about the raids that always baffled me. The dragons we keep in the kill ring eat one, maybe two baskets of fish a day. Even the Nightmare, with its voracious appetite, can barely choke down three. But when we get raided, the dragons try to take anything they can get their claws

on. Way more than they would actually need for themselves."

"So you think they're feeding something?"

"That's the idea. I mean, if they're stealing that much food, and from an island defended to the death no less, imagine how much they must gather from raiding our neighbors and hunting in the wild. I can't think of a single dragon in the handbook that would ever need to eat that much."

"It'd have to be huge..." Astrid's voice trailed off into the wind as we flew. For a time, the only thing I could hear was the breeze whipping past us and the occasional flap of Toothless's ears. He began fidgeting then more as we neared the misty fog surrounding the nest, and beneath me I could feel him growing tense.

"_Do you want to take a look?"_ Toothless vibrated below us, shaking as he usually did when he spoke. Astrid took note of it as well, gripping me a bit tighter and moving her head closer to mine. She was staring, wide-eyed at the view before us. Bathed in spotty moonlight, the source of Berk's dragon problem was sitting dead ahead.

"He said-"

"I can guess. Let's do it." Astrid's voice cut through the wind, her anticipation mixed with a noticeable amount of fear.

"You heard her, bud. Do it if you think it's safe; I don't want to put any of us in danger, but taking a closer look now might not be a bad idea." Toothless rumbled out a yes as he began pumping his wings enough to pull us back over the clouds. With a bit of work and some tailfin movement on my part, we were back high enough to see the entirety of Helheim's Gate. In the center of the massive whirlwind was the dragon's nest, burrowed into the heart of a towering volcano. Its open top peaked through the clouds, a wisp of smoke slowly billowing out.

"Well if that isn't ominous, I don't know what is," Astrid commented behind me. I'd seen it a few times before myself, when Toothless and I would fly as close as he'd let me, but despite that I still felt a rush of nervousness as we approached.

"_Hold on tight,"_ Toothless said, before quickly pulling us into a dive. Before we knew it we were right upon the volcano, circling around its rocky shores. It may have been their home, but it was mostly devoid of dragons save for a few Nightmares crowding around a crack in the mountainside. They disappeared into it as we flew by.

"So, Toothless," I started, as I noticed something peculiar, "Is there a reason why this place is so unusually quiet right now?" The hide beneath me grumbled nervously as Toothless pumped his wings.

"_I'm pretty sure the Queen knows someone's here,"_ he stated plainly. "_We're going to have to move quickly before she sends the others after us."_ With that, we made for the fissure in the wall. Inside was a series of small caverns, each with its own set of rocky obstacles to avoid. I also couldn't help but notice that dragons were literally everywhere, flying about us or lazing on the rocks of the

path we were flying through.

We entered the main chamber of the nest, and like slamming headfirst into a wall of fire, the temperature difference was obvious and nearly unbearable. Toothless, in as swift a manner as we could pull off, landed us atop an outcropping of rock closer to the ceiling than the rest. There were no other dragons there, and with neither them nor the queen in sight I felt comfortable letting my guard down a little and looking around.

Glancing down at the rest of the volcano's inhabitants, I couldn't help but notice the near-constant influx of dragons. They'd fly in, drop their kills into the darkened pit at the bottom of the cavern and then hurriedly fly away.

"Well, they definitely aren't eating it themselves... Looks like you were right." Astrid leaned over a bit as she spoke, giving herself a better view of the cave. "And is it just me, or do they all look kinda... Worried?"

"It's not just you." The skin on my knuckles had gone white, my hands as stiff on the saddle as Toothless was beneath us. Something in the heart of the dragon's nest was making a rather faint, but very deep noise, and it did not sound like a happy one. It began growing louder, and as if on command several more dragons flew in, dropping a few more morsels into the hole. But it apparently wasn't enough.

The entire volcano began filling with a thunderous roar as a giant, pock-marked reptilian head reached out of the depths. It towered halfway into the cavern we were in and slammed its open maw against one of the cave's walls, where an old Nightmare had been sitting. In a swift and horrifying crunch, one of the largest dragons ever encountered by Vikings was devoured. The growling stopped for a moment as the massive dragon swallowed. It sat there briefly, staring at a few others, when its nostrils began flaring and it began slowly taking a look around the cavern..

"I hope that doesn't mean..." I began, stopping my thought as the head focused its tiny eyes on us. For a moment the entire island seemed dead silent, save for the rushing wind of the reptile colossus breathing below us. Then, as quickly as it left, the growling began again.

"_A night fury? Here?" _The head moved closer up to us, causing Astrid to clench down on my ribs about as hard as I was holding on to Toothless. "_Clearly you do not know any better to come here... And with HUMANS?!" _ The creature lunged forward when it noticed us on Toothless's back, its front legs appearing from the darkness below. It was close enough now that I could see hundreds of scars and claw marks dotting its face, as well as a fog drifting from its nostrils.

"_Hold tight and get ready," _Toothless growled through the queen's booming vocals. In the same moment, the other dragons around the cave all began taking off, swarming around their queen like a cloud of flies.

"_You dare bring them here? You believe that old MYTH?! YOU'RE WASTING YOUR LIVES ._" Toothless blasted us upward as dragon skin quickly replaced the rock we had been sitting on not moments prior.

The other dragons began swarming us, mindlessly biting and clawing as we flew out of the mouth of the volcano. We nearly slammed into a wall as we left, and as a precaution I kept one hand firmly gripped upon one of the arms Astrid had locked around me just in case we did make contact with it.

"_KILL THEM."_ The order boomed out of the volcano's mouth, but the dragons she sent after us would have no chance at catching up, especially with how spooked Toothless had become. I'd have been impressed with how fast we were going if not for how terrified I was at knowing Berk would eventually have to fight that thing.

* * *

><p>As the distance between us and Helheim's Gate increased, we all began to calm down. Astrid's death grip on my ribcage had subsided, save for the bruises it left, and my knuckles had some color returning to them - including a little bit of blood red from holding on as tightly as I did. Toothless had calmed down too, and once his rumbling returned to a point where I could actually decipher it from the other noises he made, a new story began emerging.<p>

We continued on like this, tearing through the skies, still in a bit of shock from what had just happened. On account of the wind, I was more so feeling rather than listening to what Toothless was saying as he did his best to explain what the queen had mentioned. We crowned back over the clouds as he finished, and coming back to my senses I helped level us out as we began slowing down.

Now that we had been to (and barely escaped from) their nest, I was beginning to regret ever thinking I could take this on with some other kids, let alone by myself. Dragon or not, Toothless and I had a chicken's chance in a dragon den of getting out of a fight with that thing alive, let alone with a victory. How something so massive could even exist was enough to overwhelm me, let alone trying to stop it.

"Hiccup, how can something that big even... Exist?" Mirroring my own thoughts, Astrid finally spoke after an extended silence.

"I have no idea, Astrid. But I do know a few more things now, thanks to Toothless." I scratched his ear like I usually did, though he didn't croon. "From what I can gather, that monster has been doing this for a very long time. The local dragons call it the Red Death, and apparently it has a special quirk in that it can force other dragons to follow its orders with a mating call. Toothless and other Night Furies aren't affected by it, which explains why they're not allowed near the nest."

"So you were right after all..." Astrid's grip on me retightened just a bit. "So that means we've been fighting the wrong enemy this entire time?"

"That's the long and short of it, yeah. And this Red Death has been at it for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years. Meaning, as terrifying a thought it is, defeating her would bring a halt to all of our problems."

"You make it sound so easy. Hiccup, we'd have a better chance trying to level a mountain. I don't want to say it's impossible, but let's

be realistic here. Even if every last person on Berk tried fighting that... That thing, they'd be destroyed. None of our weapons, shields, war machines or anything else have a chance of punching through that dragon's hide." I felt Astrid's head hit my back, her hands placed on my shoulders. "There's really just nothing we can do to stop it."

"On the ground, yeah, I'd agree. But in the air? That's a different story."

"Hiccup, you did notice that Toothless is only a little bigger than one of the queen's teeth, right?"

"Yes, I did. But I also noticed that Toothless is much faster than it, even with an extra person on his back," I stated, trying to find a good segue back to what Toothless had told me earlier. "But with one rider, some better tack and a faster tail mechanism... I shouldn't have a problem flying circles around the thing."

"So you plan on fighting it alone? Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"Not if I have a plan. You see, Astrid, I know you don't understand Dragonese, but the queen mentioned a myth when she was yelling at us."

"...You're basing your master plan on a myth." Astrid let out an exasperated sigh behind me. "Are you sure you're not trying to get yourself killed?"

"It's not about the myth, Astrid, it's about the message. Among dragons, there exists a tale of a human and a Night Fury one day forging a brotherhood. Their bond would inspire an army of dragons and humans to do the same, ultimately bringing an end to the queen. Astrid, that legend exists because even these dragons know they need us to take her down. With the power of a dragon being directed by the mind of a person... It's a perfect match."

"But it's still a _myth,_ Hiccup! And even if we had an army, how would you stop the other dragons from falling under the Queen's control?"

"I'm not sure yet, but there has to be a way. Look, I know it sounds dangerous, crazy, and maybe even shortsightedly stupid, but I don't want to let that stop me from trying. I have to do this, Astrid. For all of them." I placed a hand on Toothless's head, his vibrations growing in intensity as he felt my touch. I could feel waves of gratitude running through my body, seemingly from what I'd said.

"Hiccup..." Her voice sounded oddly tender when she said my name. "I guess if anyone could do it, it'd be the guy who tamed a dragon. Just stay alive, ok? You and Toothless both."

"I'll still be in one piece when this is all over, I promise you. Now let's try to relax and enjoy the rest of the flight, alright?" Toothless crooned beneath us as he sped up a little more, causing Astrid to slip her arms back around me.

The flight back would definitely be enjoyable.

* * *

><p>"You're going to keep this quiet, aren't you? Because of him?" Astrid pointed to Toothless, who was rubbing himself against a tuft of grass near the lake of the cove. We'd landed not a few minutes prior, having flown the rest of the way back in silence after our conversation. The ride was sweet, though rather short for my liking, but amazing nonetheless.<p>

"Yes," I replied, bluntly and to the point. There was a surprising amount of determination in that word, coming from me, but I wouldn't risk my best friend for anything. "You told me you'd keep him a secret, and I'm trusting you with that. Besides, it's like you said: fighting her as we are now would be little more than suicide. We need allies and dragons before we can do anything."

"And where do you plan on finding those?" Rather than accusatory, Astrid sounded and looked genuinely interested in my ideas. It made me feel happy to have someone interested in what I had to say, especially considering that someone was her.

"We already have the dragons and the Vikings we'll need; it's just a matter of convincing them. By that, I mean we're going to have to get the other teens on our side on this. You know just as well as I do that the adults of Berk wouldn't listen to us, but if we convince our peers, I can teach them all how to bond with the dragons of the kill ring." I yawned the last few words I spoke, my body also demanding I stretch out my aching muscles.

"I don't see any of them taking you seriously, though," Astrid said, through a yawn herself.

"Probably not, but it's too late to bother worrying about it right now, anyway. What we need to do is get to sleep and regroup tomorrow, and go from there." I looked to the east again and shrugged. "And by tomorrow I mean today, considering the Sun's starting to rise." Astrid looked into the sky, noticing the early morning twilight dawning above us. "Lets get back on Toothless. Since I'm sleeping here, I'll fly you back to the village before the sun peaks." I gestured back to the dragon, who was now drinking out of the lake. She looked from him to me, smiling.

"Alright. But since we won't have any time for this when we get back to the village..." She pulled back quickly and punched me in the arm. Flinching (she always did have a hard right hook), I looked at her with confused inquiry on my face. "That was for having such little faith in me. I told you I'd keep him a secret, didn't I?" I scoffed in a joking manner.

"That was before you knew he was a dragon, so you can't exactly blame me for that, can you?" I asked, rubbing my arm. She grinned, and then grabbed me and pulled me over to Toothless. Astrid scratched him appreciatively behind the ear as she hopped on, beckoning me to follow. A smile etched across my exhausted face from the sight, I jumped in the saddle and we took off.

Toothless and I pulled a few small stunts for Astrid's enjoyment as we made the short voyage back to Berk. We approached Astrid's house at a glide, Toothless coming to a running stop to avoid the obvious

whooshing of dragon wings. In the shadow of her home, Astrid hopped off looked back at Toothless and I. With a mischievous look on her face, she grabbed me by my collar and kissed me, full on the lips, nearly dragging me off of Toothless in the process.

Several of the most amazing seconds my blank brain had ever recalled flew by, and before I realized what had happened Astrid backed away without saying anything. With a grin and a wave she ran around to the front door, slipping silently inside.

I didn't quite remember the flight back to the Cove, or much of the moment preceding opening my journal, but I did remember Toothless laughing at me the entire time. Pushing his taunts from my mind(not that it was difficult to do, all things considered), I put charcoal to parchment and started writing so fast that my pencil snapped in two. I tossed it into the fire near the den and grabbed another one.

* * *

><p>An hour and four pencils later, I'd filled the entire journal. Throwing it into the basket next to me, I stretched out and crawled over to Toothless's unfolded wings, as it proved to be the most comfortable place to sleep in our cave. As I lay down, my eyes dragging themselves shut, something occurred to me.<p>

"Toothless, if the fish thing is supposed to be done only with the human you take as your rider, why did you give me one so early on? We barely knew one another." He lifted his head and purred at me.

"_It just... Felt right. I did regret it a little after letting you touch me, but I knew it was the right thing to do in the end. I guess you'd say I just went with it."_ I understood his reasoning, since it was basically how I'd forged a relationship with him to begin with. I had another burning question to ask, though, so I opened my mouth again.

"Toothless, like I asked before... How long do Night Furies live?" I asked nervously. I didn't want either of us to be without the other, and not just because he'd be dead without a rider. With a comforting gaze, Toothless replied.

"_Most dragons live a bit longer than humans; maybe twenty years or so. I'm twenty myself, so our final days would be close regardless of how long we could live. But also, Hiccup, dragons can control their heart rates very closely. It means we can give ourselves an extra boost to keep in the air, but such control also means we can bring our hearts to a halt. My heart will stop beating when yours does; this I've already accepted."_

No words could describe the surge of emotion I felt from that declaration. I opted not to mention Toothless's comment in any of my journals, with how personal it was. Curling up in his wings, I drifted off for a short nap before I knew I'd have to be up and at the Meade Hall again.

8. Time Alone

The sun began hammering away at my eyes as Toothless moved one of his

wings out of the way. Groggy, but awake, I crawled out of the den and stretched. Crackling sounds and aching pains came from all over my body; undoubtedly a result of all the flying.

Glancing back at him, it was obvious Toothless was just as exhausted. Considering he couldn't come with me, I told him to go back to sleep as I made for one of the cove's exits. Without hesitation, he grunted a happy farewell and curled up in a fire nest next to the lake, since he only slept in the den when I was with him.

Trudging through the forest, I tried as best I could to avoid looking tired, but could barely keep from yawning. With how much time I spent furiously filling my journal before finally shutting my eyes, combined with how wired I was from being with Astrid, I only managed to get four, maybe five hours of sleep. As I approached the hall, I hoped it wouldn't be obvious enough for anyone to notice, because I wasn't in the state of mind to come up with an excuse beyond insomnia.

I began pushing open one of the doors to the Mead Hall after pulling myself up its stairs. I was easily ten minutes late, but couldn't find the effort to care with how much it took to open the door. I pushed it enough to slide in as I did a few days prior, and again the door slammed shut on me. Only this time, instead of with an intent to hurt, it was done lightly, apparently as a joke.

I looked over and saw Astrid standing there, grinning at me, a very prominent blush on her face. The rest of the teens were over at their usual table, eating with Gobber. Snotlout was the only one who had noticed Astrid's playful greeting, and he looked very unhappy about it. Turning back to Astrid, I'd noticed that she looked tired, though still quite cheery. She glanced me up and down, a smile still on her face, and asked about Toothless.

"You look even more tired than I do. And what about that little blackbird of yours? Is he still sleeping? "

"I told him to lie back down after I left, which he did without protest. I almost passed out walking here, myself. My entire body is sore as Hel from all of the flying..." I quieted my speaking since we'd entered the hall and made my way to the kitchen area, grabbing some fish and a cup of milk. Astrid grabbed her own plate, and upon returning to our group's table we sat across from one another.

"So what, did the two of you go for some more flying after you dropped me off?" Astrid said, speaking in hush to me while Gobber tried his best to keep the twins from killing each other.

"Oh, no. I stayed up for a good hour filling up one of my books," I said, sliding my bearskin to one side so she could see where I kept my journal. "After that, I had a small conversation with him before I passed out." I rubbed my eyes a little as Astrid began to talk.

"What's in that thing, anyway, Hiccup?" She asked, motioning to my journal. She'd always seen me writing in it, as many people had, but no one had ever bothered to ask me explicitly what it contained.

"It's a , uh... Just a journal I keep my notes in. This one's the

fourth I've started on in the last two days." She glared at me. "What? I take a lot of notes. And after last night my previous journal's filled to capacity..." She looked at me, blushing a little and smirking. I responded, quickly. "Uh, with, uh, you know... Just... With calculations, stories about Toothless, that kind of thing." I took another drink of my milk, the fish I was eating already half stripped of its flesh. I was considering going back for another, which was a rarity for me.

"...Can I see them? Hiccup? I mean, not... Immediately, but, I have seven years of mistakes to make up for, and that'd give me a head start. I know something like that is probably really personal to you, but I'd still like to see them some day, if you'd let me." She seemed so genuine with the statement, I'd seriously considered it until I recalled the drawings. Nearly all of them were of Astrid herself.

"Maybe... Maybe in a few weeks or so, when we know each other a little more. Like you said, there's.. A lot of personal information in those books." I glanced away, slightly embarrassed. "But anyway, we should probably move this topic along..." I gestured to Tuffnut, now sitting on the other side of Gobber, who was stealing glances at the two of us. When I turned my head back to Astrid, I noticed a small scowl on her face.

"No, Hiccup, I'm saying you should go back and get more sleep when we're done here. You look exhausted, you know. I swear, can't you take care of yourself at all?" There was a twinge of false anger in her voice, but it was apparently enough to convince her peers she was just yelling at me, considering their fresh lack of interest. Bringing her voice to a whisper, she continued. "And maybe I could go to the cove with you, since we have to work on that thing, still." I was about to make a reply when Gobber spoke up, having finally stopped the twins' hourly fight.

"Afternoon', Hiccup. Or should I say, mornin'?" I glanced at him, expecting him to be at least a little upset from my father's continued absence, which he wasn't.

"You sure look happier today," I stated frankly.

"A course, Hiccup! Yer' Dad's comin' in taday! Real soon, too. My leg's achin', and tha' means they're comin' in, probly before the sun's halfway down th' skies! Ya should be mor' excited!" He said, waving his tankard at me. "And ya should ge' ready yer cleanin' equipmen', boy. This ain' over yet." He was trying for some false confidence, I was certain. Gobber never could lie very well.

"You do realize you told me not last week that your leg was throbbing because it does randomly? What did you call it, a phantom pain? Like you can feel the leg even if it's gone?" Gobber's look faded a bit.

"Yah, Hiccup. But it's a sign, I'm sure o' it." He looked pleased with himself again, drinking out of his tankard-arm. "Oh, an' I finally hav' a job for ya taday in tha' forge! Don' worry, it's not too much. I'm gonta be busy helpin' at the docks, preparin' for Stoick's arrival. While I'm doin' that, I've got a few weapons tha' need rebalancin' an' sharpenin'." He said, emptying his tankard of what smelled like beer.

"Great. And how long will that take me to do, exactly? How many weapons are there to work on?" I was really hoping I could go back to the cove and curl up with Toothless until sundown, and then spend the night trying to figure out a way to convince the others that dragons were better as allies than enemies. I'd hoped Astrid would honor her suggestion to come with me, too, since Toothless's wings are warm, and large enough for two people, if they were close...

I slammed the thought out of my mind as Gobber spoke again.

"S' nothin' ya can't handle, boy. Jus' a few swords, rebalancin' a couple a spears... Oh, an' Astrid wants the works on her axe; that'll be the bulk o' yer time." I looked at her, a blank stare and a very small smile plastered across her face. I had a feeling I wouldn't be alone in the forge that afternoon, and I both enjoyed and feared the prospect.

"Well, I'm gettin' goin'. The res' o' ya relax an enjoy yer lunch," he looked at the group, and then to me, "or in Hiccup's case, brea'fast. An' don' go throwin' anythin' or causin' trouble, or it'll be cleanin' duty for the lot o' ya." He stood from the table, and with a wave he walked off. When the door shut, the twins turned to Astrid and I, a gleam in their eyes.

"Why are you two so tired today? Rollin' in the hay behind the barn last night?" Piped up Tuffnut. Ruff laughed and chimed in.

"I don't see any hay, but I did see them talking near the torches last night. Then they vanished." Ruff and Tuff were sniggering, Fishlegs looked uncomfortable (didn't he always?) and Snotlout looked angry. Well, angrier.

"Hiccup and Astrid? Oh, that's rich." Tuff stated.

"She could do better." Was I really that bad a catch before I met Toothless?

"Ooh, maybe they went on a romantic moonlit walk!" Tuff piped up, though technically he was at least half-right.

"It was too cloudy to see the moon at all last night, shit-for-brains." Shot Ruff, causing me to grin a bit. She was right, but only if you were beneath the clouds...

"Shut up, dragon-ass!" Screamed Tuff. I knew where this was heading, and I wasn't ready to deal with it right now. I hoped I could shed some reason on the situation and get them both to quit, or at least, take it somewhere else.

"You two do know you're twins, right? You're basically insulting yourselves," I chimed in. They both stopped arguing and looked at me, bewildered looks upon their faces. They glanced back to one another for a moment, and then Ruff jumped across the table at Tuff, knocking him to the ground. I sighed as they started beating on each other once again, hoping Gobber wouldn't find out and make us all clean the Hall. Ignoring them as best I could I turned to Fishlegs, who had a face like he was about to be eaten by a Gronckle.

"So, what's wrong, Fishlegs? You look like you're staring Loki in the

face." He snapped out of his daze and looked at me.

"Hiccup, if they land today, we've only got tomorrow free before Dragon Training officially begins. EVERYONE is stressed out about it, except you. How can you be so calm? You're the easiest target for them!" I was thankful to have a decent response to this, considering how tired I was. I finished off the rest of my fish, hungrily, before speaking again.

"Simple," I said between chewing, "My Dad will be in the ring with us, or did you forget that? He won't let anything too dangerous happen, and neither will Gobber. You're worrying over nothing." I finished off my milk. Apparently the other teens had forgotten that we'd have both the Chief of our clan and his best friend and fellow warrior with us. We wouldn't be unassisted, and the thought seemed to calm everyone at (and on the floor next to) the table.

Eventually, the twins took their fight outside and after they'd gone, Fishlegs let out a nervous moan and followed them. I knew he was afraid of what was coming up because he was almost as poor a fighter as I was. I felt bad for him, but hopefully if my plan worked the way I intended, he won't have to worry about training.

As I sat there contemplating Fishlegs's conundrum, I noticed Snotlout slide up to Astrid, trying to flirt with her. She tensed up in annoyance and a bit of anger, which only grew worse as he started speaking.

"Hey babe. We should go work out today, just the two of us? I've been working on my abs, if you wanna see 'em..." She honestly looked disgusted, and while that made me wildly happy, it almost made me feel a bit bad for Snotlout. Then again, I wouldn't have a bandaged, scabby hand if not for him, so instead I just waited to see how she'd shut him down.

"Actually, Snotlout, no, I don't need to work on my abs. They already hurt a lot from some new routines I've been doing, which I'll hopefully be continuing," she looked directly at me for a split second, "as soon as possible." She barely wanted me around the day before, but at that moment it felt like she couldn't get enough of me. It felt like a growing ball of pride in my chest that quickly began to deflate as I thought. Was she interested in me because of me, or because I tamed a dragon?

"Yeah, well, if you ever need help, I'm the man for the job, and you know it. You know you can't stay away from this," he spat as he gestured to himself.

"Actually, it isn't difficult at all to stay away from 'this,' because I can usually smell you before I see you." She turned to me after shooting him down for Thor knows how many times, speaking in a surprisingly harsh tone. "Let's get to the forge and get this over with, Hiccup. My axe needs work, and I expect it done first." Her tone was so convincing I began wondering if it was genuine as she stood up and stamped off. I slid out of my seat, making to follow her and leaving Snotlout alone at the empty table.

I reached the door, hoping to myself she didn't regret that heat of the moment kiss she gave me the night before, though it did seem rather strange she did it at all. Not that I could really complain

about it, though.

As I slid the door open and stepped into the sun, I was immediately grabbed from the side and yanked behind a large boulder near the entrance of the Hall by none other than Astrid. She gave me a tight hug, pulling away quickly.

"Don't think too much at what I said in there, Hiccup. I did kinda lay it on you thick, but that's mainly because of Snotlout." Her nose wrinkled a little when she said his name, making me grin. "He's always like that, and it's really been getting under my skin these days. He just can't take a hint," she said, pinching the bridge of her nose with a thumb and forefinger, "but if I told him off now, he'd probably be none too willing to train the village's dragons with us."

"That and I'm pretty sure he'd just double down on his advances, thinking you were playing some sort of game with him." Astrid sighed, the frustration on her face both evident and kinda cute.

"Ugh, probably. Now lets hurry over to the forge and get your work done. I can sharpen the swords and my axe while you work on balancing the weaponry." She smiled, knocked me on the arm and pulled me to the forge.

* * *

><p>It was clear to me, after an hour of pounding straight the bent steel of completely ruined swords, refinishing several handles for maces and axes and organizing the scrap metal pile, that Gobber's grasp on a 'light' amount of work was very loose. The job he left would've taken me until sundown if I didn't have help, but thankfully, I had Astrid with me.<p>

While I was hammering away, she was over at the grinder, sharpening dull weaponry and doing a damn fine job, at that. Astrid really only needed a little explanation about how to work the device before taking off, almost like she'd done it for years. She always was so full of surprises.

"So, have you figured out any plans?" she said to me. In truth, while I had been thinking about ways of approaching the other teens, none of the angles I'd considered taking seemed like they would work. There was also the issue of me not really knowing how they'd react to anything I might try, but thankfully I had Astrid to ask about that.

She had just started sharpening her axe, finished with the swords I set her with. I corrected her technique slightly before answering her, but assured her she was doing an otherwise perfect job.

"Honestly, I think I'm going to have to talk to the dragons tonight in the kill ring, when no one is around. It's the only way I can get them to understand they can trust me." Still grinding away at her axe head, she looked up at me.

"And how do you plan on gaining the trust of these creatures without letting them out of their cages?" she demanded. "You know there's a constant sentry guarding the dragon kill ring that won't allow anyone

but your father to open any dragons' cages at night." I'd realized this, but I wouldn't need to let the dragons out of their cages just to talk to them.

"I know, but they'd probably still let me in the ring if I ask, even if I can't open the cages. The dragons will be able to hear me through the doors, and since I can understand Dragonese, they might trust me. If not, the Legend of the Night Fury is my trump card, because apparently we're the first two humans to ever know about any kind of dragon lore since before the Red Death came." She flipped her hair out of her eyes, looking a little relieved at that statement.

"So you tell them you not only know of the story, but also that you've bonded with a Night Fury and you want them to play along in the ring until you can figure out how to get the others to bond with them?" she asked as she checked her axe's sharpness.

"Yeah, that's the gist of it. I want to start it tonight, when my father returns. I might be able to get in even with a guard there, but since that job isn't taken very seriously considering how rare a breakout is, there's a good chance he might be pulled from duty to help unload the ships. In that case, we'll have total freedom to go in and find the Nadder's cage." I smirked at her.

Why the Nadder?" she asked, a knowing smile growing on her face as she placed her axe on the workbench next to the other finished weaponry.

"Because that's the dragon you'll be training." Her eyes widened, but other than that her face remained the same. I felt my heart jump at her surprise and wondered if there were any expressions she could make that I wouldn't enjoy seeing.

I pulled my mind away from her and my plans for a time, turning to a specific axe handle I'd been working on. I picked up her axe she'd just placed on the table, moving it to an open bit of workbench so I could service it. I ripped off her battered old handle with ease thanks to how worn-out she'd made it, replacing it instead with one made of a finely polished hickory and wrapped firmly with a leather strap to give her a better grip.

* * *

><p>Roughly two hours later, we'd finished, both even more exhausted than before. Astrid left the forge before I did, taking her axe and heading off to the woods to meet me later on. I'd left in another direction, walking to the docks to gather a basket's worth of fish from a trap I'd created.<p>

The fish now stuck in the one-way cage I'd designed were numerous enough to fill most of the basket I was carrying for Toothless. He may have been able to hunt just fine himself, but I still liked bringing him something he didn't need to work for, if only to see his happy reaction.

Throwing my haul over my shoulder, I made my way into the forest before anyone could notice me or the load I was carrying. I couldn't help being aware of how much easier constantly lugging bushels of fish to Toothless had become in comparison to the way it used to

feel, which I could only thank flying for.

My head metaphorically in the clouds, I barely heard a rustling coming from behind me. Flipping around, hoping no one would be there to ask what I was doing with my basket, I came face to face with Astrid. Her closeness made me flinch a little and stumble back from surprise, but I kept on my feet.

"That basket looks pretty heavy for you. Want me to carry it?" she said, in a mocking voice. I gave her my usual sarcastic tone and playfully shot back at her.

"Oh, come on, I'm not that weak. Besides, I've been doing this for a while now, even if Toothless can fish by himself. Feels like nothing at all." She looked at me, cockily.

"Alright, suit yourself. But you can't say I didn't offer you help. By the way," She put her axe out in front of me, stopping me in my tracks. I examined it again closely, noticing again how beautiful it'd turned out. It was fitting, really.

"I didn't say anything about the axe handle before, but I was really surprised you thought enough about it beforehand to consider making me a new one. With how little time you've spent in that forge over the past few days, I can't help but wonder how long you've been working on it." I put the basket down and turned to her, gently pulling the axe from her grip. I weighed it in my palms, keeping it balanced in my open hand.

"It took me three months to find the right cut of wood that felt like it would be perfect for how you use this axe. I also went with a slightly longer handle, because you've gotten a bit taller and the handle needed to be adjusted accordingly. I've polished and worked at it for a while now, making sure it was as perfect as it could be. I even wrapped the handle in a dark green leather strap that I dyed a while ago. I've got a bunch of different colors, but you did say you liked green." I rubbed my chin in my hand. "I think I've actually been working on this handle for four or five months, if you count the time I spent waiting for Trader Johann to find me the best cut of hickory he could find back on the mainland." Astrid just stared at me, a soft, happy look on her face.

"You've been planning this, for me, for that long? Even... Even when I'd said I... Hated you?" I placed my free hand on her shoulder, shaking my head lightly from side to side.

"Astrid, it's the past. I don't care about what happened back then as long as you and I get to stay close, like we are now." Smiling, she closed her eyes and gently moved my hand off of her.

"Hiccup..." She punched me again, playfully, "Again, this... Only you, Hiccup, would be this thoughtful about someone else. Someone that you barely knew, and... Still don't know much about at all, really..." She took the axe from me and hugged me tightly with her other arm.

"It's alright, Astrid. You don't have to thank me for an axe handle. I saw a problem, and I fixed it. That's all." We separated and kept walking, Astrid humming happily to some tune I'm sure she was just making up as she went along. I had to admit it sounded quite nice,

though it only lasted for as long as it took her to find a decently large tree uncluttered by branches. She put up her hand to stop me from moving forward, took aim and flung the newly sharpened axe at the hulking timber, burying one side of the double blade halfway to the handle. I grunted in surprise at how deep into the bark it sunk before I opened my mouth.

"Wow, that's... You really did a good job sharpening that thing." She laughed a bit.

"Actually, I think it has to do with the handle. The throw just felt better. Thank you, Hiccup." She gave me a warm smile before turning and trying to pry the axe from the tree. It took the both of us tugging at it to finally pull the axe out, the force of which threw us on the ground. She landed on top of me, but just laughed and pulled me to my feet after standing herself. With a grin I continued leading her to the cove.

"So, today's turning out to be quite a nice day, by Berk's standards," I said. In truth, it was beautiful outside. The temperature was well above freezing, and if it were just a few degrees warmer I probably would've shed my vest entirely. On our way to see Toothless, I took a detour and showed her where I'd shot him down originally, the bolas still lying on the ground. I made a mental note to bring those back to the forge and melt them down when Astrid spoke up at my side.

"You were just trying to help. And besides, it's the past, right? If you can use that argument on me, then I can use it on you." I smiled, leaving the bolas where they were for the time being. I'd still be coming back for them, though; scrap metal was scrap metal, after all.

* * *

><p>Astrid seemed really excited to meet Toothless during the day, and when he realized I was with company he trusted, he bounded over to her and licked her in the face, making her laugh once again.<p>

"Toothless, is that like a dragon greeting, or something?" I wondered to my scaly companion.

"_No. I just like doing it because your kind apparently finds it cute and gross, and the reaction is usually pretty good."_ Toothless laughed as he licked her face again. I knew the dragon was mischievous, but now that I could speak with him I knew that most of the things he did were done in jest, just to see our reactions. I had no problem with that, since sometimes I'd do things like it myself.

I went to my den and grabbed a rag, throwing it to Astrid. She wiped off her face and then washed it with a bit of water from the lake.

"Hiccup, you know... Toothless really is beautiful. Amazing, really. Now that I can actually see him, I can finally appreciate him in his entirety..." She walked over to me. "He reminds me of you, in a way."

"...How exactly do you figure?" I wondered aloud. She wiped her bangs from over her eye and continued.

"Well, think about it. I'm finally seeing Toothless, really seeing him, for the first time. And he's nothing like what I was expecting at all. And if you swapped out 'Toothless' for 'Hiccup' in what I just said, it's still just as true." I blushed, happily smiling as I had been since this whole thing began.

"So this is where you two have been sleeping?" Astrid said, motioning to the den. She walked over and peered inside the cave-turned-home, noticing most of the amenities for camping, including a quilt for Toothless and I to sleep on(that we basically didn't use).

"Yeah. It looks a little cramped, but you don't really notice it when Toothless here wraps you up in his wings and purrs you to sleep," I said as I smiled at her. She grinned and shook her head, a movement I'd been getting out of her a lot lately.

"You sleep wrapped in your dragon's wings?" She said incredulously, like she thought I'd make up that particular part about befriending a dragon. Smirking again, I replied.

"Yes, I do. It's warm, it's dark, and the rumbling he makes while he purrs is enough to put anyone into a deep, comfortable sleep." She looked at me mischievously, clearly planning something in that head of hers.

"Well, I'm tired, and I know you are. Mind if I crash in your den?" She said, pulling off her shoulder pads and hanging them near where I usually put my bearskin vest. I had Toothless start a fire and nervously threw off my boots, leaving them just below my freshly hung bearskin. It might not need to dry, but it was nice to have a really warm vest to put back on in Berk's usual weather.

As I stretched out, I noticed Astrid unbuckle her armored skirt and let it slide off of her. I knew she wore pants underneath it, but it was still neither something I was used to seeing, nor something my heart had been ready for. She hung her armor next to my bearskin, looked at me and smiled. "Wanna do some cuddling?" She said in a playful voice. My face turned crimson and my mind froze.

"Astri- uh, I, well, YES, OH, wa-wait, I, uh... Well, I mean, heh, it's, well- I mean it's not- Wait. What, uh, what is... What is this?" I finally managed to say, after stumbling through the beginnings of nearly a dozen different sentences. She looked at me and laughed. "A way to see you get all flustered. It's hilarious, Hiccup. I'm, sorry, but I really love seeing you freeze up like that." She leaned against the cove wall next to the den for a moment, laughing along with Toothless at what she'd just done.

"No, Astrid. I mean, uh, what... What exactly, uh, are-" I had no idea how I wanted to phrase what I was trying to say, but I'd managed to piece together something that was at least semi-intelligible. "What... Is this?" Gesturing between the two of us. "What is it? Are we friends? What? I mean, I just... I'm not so sure about what's been going on, and between how quickly we started talking and that kiss I wasn't expecting I'm confused and I don't know wha-" She put two fingers on my lips, stopping me mid-sentence. Having my attention and some quiet, she put her hand down.

"Hiccup, to be honest, what you just said is about all I can tell you about what's going on here. I don't know you nearly well enough to justify much of it, or even call you my friend. But with how different my life has become in the past couple of... Well, hours, and because of you, at that, I guess I'm just trying to see where this might lead."

"I guess it's probably best not to think that much about it," I added, hoping that I could ease the awkward feeling I had growing in my stomach. Unfortunately, it continued to sit where it was.

"Yeah. I mean, we do need to get to know each other again, especially if we're going to try teaching that group of idiots back at the village to bond with dragons," Astrid said, drawing some laughter from both of us.

"You're right. I only work as well as I do with Toothless because of how well we understand each other... And I'll need the same from you if we're going to pull this off." The same mischievous look coming to her eyes, Astrid pushed herself off of the wall she was leaning against and began twirling her hair.

"Well, I know of two scaly wings that would give us a lot of uninterrupted time to talk," she said with a wink. I could almost feel blood rushing back to my face once more as my mouth went slack and eyes widened. I was entirely frozen in place from the suggestion, and the two in front of me most certainly noticed, considering how hard they were both laughing at my expense. To be fair, I'd have been laughing with them if I could move.

"Oh, Hiccup... Too easy." Giggling, Astrid grabbed and pulled me to the den. Toothless had already been sitting at the mouth of it, and as we approached he laid back in his usual position, wings open. With a shove I dropped down on the leathery flap, followed quickly by the girl that pushed me there. Toothless lowered his other wing, shrouding us in near-complete darkness.

"What..." I squeaked out, barely capable of composing myself at that point.

"Oh, calm down Hiccup, I'm just messing with you. Besides, you really should get some sleep, and I'm still tired myself..." She stretched out next to me, yawning along with Toothless. "And like I'd pass up a chance to do this, sleeping next to a dragon! You were right about it, too; I'm pretty comfortable..."

"Just wait until he starts pur-" I was cut off by Astrid kissing me again, crushing what little composure I had left. Throwing caution to the wind I slipped my arms around her, putting every feeling I had into the motion as I pulled her close. I had no idea what I was doing and my heart felt like it was going to detonate in my chest, but Astrid didn't seem to mind. A few short moments later we parted, as the temporarily-forgotten Toothless began vibrating.

"_Look, you two are real cute and all, but that's about as far as I'd like you going with this when you're lying on my wings,_" rumbled Toothless.

"Oh, don't worry, bud," I started, a quiver in my voice, "if I do

anything besides sleep at this point, my heart will kill me."

"Did Toothless just say something about that bit of making out we just d-" Astrid stopped speaking, apparently freshly aware of what she and I had just done. Suddenly she pushed away from me, causing Toothless to flip up his wing as Astrid rolled into the cave.

"I'm- I'm sorry, Hiccup," she began, an obvious twinge of regret in her voice, "I... I didn't mean to do that. I just... I went to far with trying to mess with you. But this is all still new to me, too, and I... I kinda ruined the moment there, didn't I?" Her voice gradually got softer as she spoke. "I'm just... Not used to this. I'm sorry."

"Astrid... It's okay, really." I sat up, lifting Toothless's wing a bit to get a better view. "I don't have a problem with what just happened, and I mean that. But I am curious why you decided to do it again." She looked at me, and then thought back.

"I... don't really know. My mind went blank when it started, but I think... I think I just wanted to see what it was like a second time." I could tell she was uncomfortable; most Vikings didn't care to talk about their feelings, and she was no exception. "I went too far. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize, but... Just answer a question for me: did it feel right at the time?"

"Absolutely," she admitted, before turning an even brighter shade of red that was quickly covered by her hands.

"Then just go with it."

"Huh?"

"When Toothless and I were first learning how to fly together, I had a cheat sheet to control his tailfin. I lost it mid-flight after a saddle malfunction, forcing me to make do without it or die trying. We managed to get through the ordeal with a combination of skill, instinct and trust," I said, absentmindedly stroking Toothless's tail as I spoke. "Well, that and a bit of dumb luck. But my point is, I didn't overthink what I had to do, and that's probably one of the reasons why we didn't slam into anything on the way down."

"Well," she began, as she slowly crawled back to Toothless and I, "I think I'll take your advice and try not to overthink it. Besides, you're really comfy." Toothless snorted. "Yes, so are you. Now, all drama aside, can we please get some damn sleep? I'm exhausted."

We lied down, and even though I expected her to keep her distance I felt Astrid snuggle into me a little.

"Hey Hiccup?" she asked in the quiet dark.

"Yes?"

"...Do you think I might be able to look at one of those journals before training starts?"

"Uh... Let me think about it. Even one of them has enough to..." My

mind pictured Astrid flipping through the pages, grimacing as she noticed how frequently she appeared on them. "Well, let's just say they're very personal and potentially embarrassing. They do go into depth about what I love, what I want, who I am as a person; that sort of thing." She giggled again, sounding just as cute (and just as alien coming from her) as before.

"I know, and that's why I want to read them! Don't take it the wrong way; I don't want to mock you or anything. I just think it'd help getting to know how you think." She shifted again, getting closer to me still. "Something to consider is all..." Silence overtook us again, and for a moment I really thought she was asleep until I felt her lips glance mine for another brief moment.

"Sorry... But I wanted to do it again."

"Ditto," I mumbled in return, as I slipped quickly into my waiting dreams.

9. Perhaps Too Soon

As it turned out, 'just go with it' wasn't always the best strategy.

"Well... So, uh... Hi," Astrid said, breaking the deafening silence between the two of us.

"Yeah... Hi. Sleep... Sleep well?"

"Oh! Uh, y-yeah. It was... It was alright. I mean, it was, uh... Good."

The sun had already begun setting when we were awoken by Toothless. Neither Astrid nor I immediately understood what we'd done just hours prior, but it quickly became apparent with how close we still were. With the realization having sunk in, I began noticing just how cramped the den really was at that moment, and how inviting just about anywhere else felt in comparison.

The three of us clambered out into the late afternoon, Toothless silently wandering over to the lake to play with its fish. Astrid and I were left alone by the smoldering fire pit with little to distract us from the obviously tense feeling hanging in the air. I threw my vest and boots back on as she re-equippeded her armor, and with that out of the way we sunk into nervously watching Toothless with extreme intent. After a short eternity, Astrid decided to break the silence.

"Hiccup? Look, I know that was, well, kinda... Much. For the both of us. Even if it was... Unreal, at the time." I noticed her trying to look at me out of the corner of her eye, but turned away immediately upon noticing me glancing back at her. I cleared my throat a little in the small silence that followed.

"You make a good point. But... It definitely wasn't..."

"The right thing to do?"

"I was going to say 'uncomfortable,' but... You do make a good

point," I said, as the cove began reminding me of how cramped the den was. I could also feel the same unpleasant sinking from earlier, which I fought as best I could while Astrid tentatively spoke again.

"But.. Well, look, Hiccup, we're both close to adulthood, and these things... Happen, sometimes. Not to say it wasn't, uh, memorable, but I mean, maybe it'd be a good idea to, uh... To..."

"To go a little slower? Or, uh... Focus on a solution to the Red Death problem?"

"Yeah, that... That one."

"You're... That makes sense." I really didn't want to pretend that time together didn't happen, but we did have still bigger things to focus on. Our emotions would have to wait, or at least take a backseat to the plan, especially considering how poor Astrid and I were at handling them(for very different reasons). Considering the time we'd spent together, I never realized just how **easy it was to **let them get the better of us, but in the context of the last few hours it wasn't hard to understand, especially for her.

Astrid had been overworked for years, maybe longer, training to carry the entire weight of our generation; training to lead the clan itself one day. Then out of the blue(both literally and figuratively) I came along and gave her a better option, and all she had to do in return was throw away all of the years of dedication she'd put into fighting and trust in me instead. Me: a young, gangly blacksmith's apprentice who happened to tame a dragon.

Even as an estranged friend, I was the only constant, the only comforting place in all of the change I was trying to force her through. Sure, it was better for all of us in the long run, and she wouldn't be the only one helping me if things turned out how I wanted, but it definitely would take a lot of work to get used to nonetheless. And beyond that, the emotional toll we placed on each other wasn't helping.

The pit of anxiety in my chest now feeling more like an angry beehive, having free forge access for the following week felt like much less of an accomplishment. I could only imagine how Astrid was feeling about everything, though, especially considering how much more confused she seemed to be about it all than I was.

Vikings on Berk didn't often talk about their feelings, especially ones as young as we were. Astrid especially had always looked for the easiest solution to this kind of thing, usually involving her axe in some way. But without it, she was undoubtedly lost.

"Look, Astrid. A lot of things... a **lot** of things have happened in the past day or so. It's okay if you're confused; I know I am. But that's not really the issue here," I began, hoping that whatever I said next would help move us along to what needed to be done. "Besides, it's not like what happened has to mean anything... Significant. We were both overloaded, so we took it out on each other in a way neither of us were used t-"

"Hiccup," Astrid stated, cutting me off before I could start rambling. "Hiccup, it's not like... We can't exactly act like that

didn't happen, but you are right about the other thing. This isn't the time to be worrying about our personal lives, and it definitely isn't a time for us to be wasting time when your father's probably almost here. Let's hurry over to the arena and see if it's still being guarded." With a nod I swallowed the words I couldn't say, turned on my heel and rested my eyes on Toothless. He was staring at us from across the lake, seemingly amused by our banter.

"_Are you two leaving?"_ he asked, leaping and gliding over the lake with all of the grace he could muster with a missing tailfin.

"That's right bud," I said as Toothless landed in front of us. "We've gotta get going. I'll see you l-" I stopped, holding my breath for a moment before sighing. With my father now home, I wouldn't be seeing Toothless nightly. "With any luck I'll probably see you tomorrow." Toothless nodded, and for once that evening looked as lost as Astrid and I felt.

"_I know, Hiccup. It's hard, but try not to let it get to you. There's too much riding on us for you to let your judgment get cloudy, and the same goes for her as well," __Toothless said, gesturing to Astrid as he vibrated. "__Now get going to the ring and see what those dragons have to say."_

"Alright, Toothless, we will. And... Thank you."

"_I should be thanking you,"_ he replied, his lips turning up in a grin as they often did. "_Dragon relationships aren't nearly as complicated, and as a result not nearly as entertaining to watch as human ones are. We stake a claim and then mate for life if that claim is accepted, or move on if it's declined. But your kind? Your kind, you love making everything confusing. And something tells me the two of you make an already complicated bond even more complicated because of who you are." _He huffed, blowing two small pillars of flame from the slits over his still-grinning mouth. "_But we can talk later. You two get going and let me know how it turns out when you get back."_ I couldn't help but grin at him as he spoke, even if my nerves were shot.

"Absolutely, Toothless. I'll see you when I see you." My determination and confidence had worn down to near-nothings, but I pushed forward regardless with Astrid in tow.

"_One more thing!_" I heard Toothless grumble as we exited the cove, "_Your life would be a lot easier if you'd worry less! Oh, and I'm using some of your firewood!" _ Only a few steps from the exit, I turned my eye back to the cove once again. Toothless had piled a decent number of logs onto the rekindled fire, and was watching them burn from the cove entrance, where he was lying.

"I've got some spare clothes in there if you get lonely!" I shouted back to him, as my mouth slowly curled into a smile. I heard him grunt as he nodded, his grin still right where it was before.

* * *

><p>The walk to the arena, while quiet and dark, wasn't nearly as awkward as waking up. We had a half-hour journey ahead of us, and I was sure Astrid knew just as well as I did that making the entire

trek in silence would be worse than relaxing, or as Toothless had put it, 'worrying less.' With that in mind, I spoke.<p>

"So, about this plan," I began, as I ran a hand through my hair, "I think what we should do first is just get in the ring. I won't say anything to begin with; I'll just listen to them." I considered what would come next before continuing. "Since we don't know them at all, we can't be sure how aggressive these dragons are, or how they'll react to our presence. With that in mind, I don't want them to know I can understand them until I can be sure they haven't lost it from being caged for so long. If they seem balanced, I'll let them know I'm listening." Astrid slowed for a moment to pull a few burrs off of her shirt, but continued our conversation.

"Then what are you going to do?" she asked, to which I had no good answers. I was mostly forging ahead without much of a plan at all, but I didn't want her to know that.

"If the sentry is there, we'll just go in and play it by ear. If not, I'll have you sneak down to the dock and grab a few fish. Then..." I sighed. "We'll play it by ear. There's only so much planning you can do when it comes to dealing with untamed dragons, especially ones that spend their days either being beaten on or locked in complete darkness." My thoughts started piling up on me, as they sometimes did, and I began thinking through everything that might - and probably would- go wrong when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't worry about it too much." It was a simple thing, and the first time we'd come in contact since waking back up, but it made me feel considerably reassured about what I was doing. Even if I failed, I still had her here to help me.

"Thanks, Astrid."

"Don't mention it. Now, if everything works out and these dragons accept you're not dangerous, where do we go from there?" She crossed her arms as she spoke, for once out of thought rather than anger.

"We go to the Nadder's cage, open it and officially introduce the two of you," I stated, noticing Astrid tense up the moment it left my mouth. "Don't worry. I'll be there the entire time, and I'm only planning on doing it if we know we can trust her. If we get that far, you'll let her know that she can trust us by giving her a fish." Astrid still seemed very put-off by the entire idea, and I couldn't exactly blame her for it. A lifetime of learning to hate and kill the creatures wouldn't be going away overnight for anyone, let alone a Viking.

"Hiccup, on an unrelated note, how do you know the Nadder is a girl? Toothless, right?" I heard her ask, as she picked some remaining bits of burr from her shirt.

"Yeah, but I had my suspicions that the Gronckle at least was female. I mean, have you ever seen a male Gronckle during any of the raids? They're almost twice the size as the one in our ring when they're fully grown."

"I haven't seen the Gronckle that we have in there now, but the one before that was pretty huge. Even so, what does that have to do with

the Nadder?"

"It really doesn't have anything to do with her. I only mentioned it because, but according to Toothless, all of them are female." I rubbed my lightly-bruised arm absentmindedly while thinking about how that might affect their aggressiveness. "Either way, we need to let them know we plan on ending this war," I said, as I gently grabbed Astrid's arm and directed her through the darkness of the forest. Within moments we came to another path, and after cutting through the brush, emerged in a clearing near the bridge to the kill ring.

"Are you ready for this?" Astrid asked, apparently noticing how worried I was.

"Barely. You?"

"About the same. I wouldn't mind bringing my axe with us, but that would really only make things worse," she said, absentmindedly placing her hand on the weapon strapped to her waist, "and this is probably going to be hard enough as it is."

"Oh, of course it will be. But we won't find that out standing around here," I said, as I put a foot on the bridge ahead of us. Astrid followed at my side as we crossed the bridge to the arena, and to either success or failure.

"You know, we still have some walking left to do, and I want to... Clarify something." Astrid's voice and temperament were worrying me a bit, but at least we were still moving.

"About?"

"About what happened back at the cove," she replied, smacking the metaphoric beehive in my chest with a stick. "We... We did go a bit far. But I don't want you to think I regret it, or that what I said isn't still true." I glanced at her in confusion as we made our way up the path to the arena. With a simple smile, Astrid responded to my obliviousness.

"I really could get used to this," she said, gesturing between us and the arena we were rapidly approaching. "All of it. Only someone like you would come up with the kind of plan we're about to actually do."

"I appreciate it," I replied, grinning like a fool from the praise, "but don't applaud me for a job I haven't even done yet."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, grabbing my hand and pulling me quickly toward the arena entrance.

* * *

><p>The sentry was nowhere to be found when we arrived, just as I'd expected(and hoped). Astrid and I unlatched the outer door to the arena, proceeding to open it with the winch it was connected to. The inner door opened with a similar mechanism, and after getting it out of the way we stepped out onto the cold floor of the kill ring. It looked much bigger from the inside, and with the time of day it was also eerily quiet save for the deep breathing of the dragons that lived there.<p>

I sent Astrid off to the docks to grab a few fish, specifically telling her to avoid eels, while I began trying to get a feel for the creatures we'd be working with. Choosing a random number out of five, I walked up to the door just left of center and concentrated. From within the sealed chamber I heard a distinct growl, and with a bit of focus I noticed it drift from an unintelligible grumbling to speech. A gravelly voice pierced the cold, silent twilight.

"_I take it its morning again?"_ I heard the dragon yawn, sounding not unlike Toothless in the process. "_Think they'll feed us or try to kill us?"_ came the voice from beyond the door. For a moment there was no response, just the sound of dragons breathing in the night, until the speaker's neighbor to the right began grumbling. The center chamber, its double doors facing the entrance to the arena, held a large and imposing voice that sounded older and a bit brash when compared to the first. That one had to be the Nightmare.

"_It's not morning, you stupid flying rock. A Viking kid is in the ring even though it's past sundown,"_ she responded, I assumed, to the Gronckle. Her voice boomed over the other noises in the arena, forcing a bit of smoke out through the crack where the two doors met. From the far left I heard another voice, not unlike the one coming from behind the door that was currently smoking. Oddly enough, it almost sounded like an echo.

"_Would you two shut up already? We're trying to sleep in here."_

"_You might be trying to sleep, but I feel awake."_

"_Well, I don't, so we're sleeping. Got it?"_

For chambers designed for single dragons, two voices could really only mean two heads, meaning the far left enclosure held the Zippleback. There were only two enclosures left with uncertainty behind them, so with a turn on my heel I walked to the right of the Nightmare's cage. The next door over was visibly less-worn than the others, and also unlike them, was totally silent. Curious, I knocked lightly against it to see if anything responded.

"_Oh!"_ Came a small, jittery voice. "_What was that? A sound? It feeding time? Fish? Can I? Please? OH I hope we eat! Hungry! Food! Foooooooood foodfoodfoo-"_ the little purring creature went on and on, running around the inside of its cage from top to bottom and back again._

"_Great, the stupid male woke it up. And here I thought I'd finally get a chance to preen in silence,"_ came the vibrations behind the final door. Always the vain kind, that voice could only belong to the Nadder I was looking for. For how deadly they could be, Nadders were very keen on looking nice, apparently even when they couldn't see themselves for days at a time.

The cage I was in front of went quiet again, the Nadder inside apparently listening to see if I was still there or not. After a few minutes of silence(minus the Terror, who was still running around yipping), I heard a growl of speech from my left once again.

"_Is that boy still here?"_ came the coarse voice of the Gronckle I'd

first heard when I walked in.

"_Yes, I can smell him. He smells like the beast that runs their village._" A huff of smoke escaped the Nightmare's cage, as it had earlier.

"_You don't think he's here to... Beat us, is he?"_ the Nadder spoke, a twinge of fear in her voice. "_I remember hearing stories from the last Nightmare they kept here... After the Beast caught one of the dragons that he thought took his life mate, he brought it to this ring and killed it with his bare hands. Poor creature was begging him to stop. If only they could understand us..."_ Her voice trailed off as the translation in my mind lingered._

My Dad really had gone berserk that night, even if I'd never seen it. Of course, rumors like that travel fast, even in Berk, but I didn't get to see him or the ring itself until the day after. The dragon he'd beaten was gone, but the bloodstains and destruction left behind were all over the killing floor. My father's hands were scarred and bruised, both with broken bones. That day marked the first time I was truly terrified of what he could do, even if he hadn't done it in front of me.

"_Like that would matter. If I had my life mate taken from me like that, I'd have done the same thing,"_ growled the Nightmare, surprisingly enough.

"_You're... Defending a Viking?"_ responded the Gronckle, surprise etched into her stony voice.

"_I'm not siding with him, I just understand his rage. I feel the same of the Red Death killing my own life mate._" For such an imposing dragon, the nightmare sounded rather weak at that moment. I'd been listening to their diatribe in silence, and as I stood there I quickly realized how much of a toll this was taking on everyone involved. My father and his rage, the Nightmare's loss, the dragons' lack of freedom...

"_Well, look at it this way. Those stupid Viking kids will be 'training' with us soon. You can take it out on the winner._" Apparently even the dragons knew the Nightmares were only released when it was their time to be slain by an upcoming Viking. Tradition or not, I really didn't like the idea of this dragon taking her frustration out on Astrid, and I disliked the idea of her being killed by Astrid nearly as much.

"_You don't think he might be trying to sneak in early? I heard the Viking watching us leave a while ago, so I'm sure no one's near here at this hour other than this kid,"_ the Gronckle grumbled.

"_There was a female with him, but she ran off. She might come back, though,_" echoed the Zippleback, its doubled growl breaking through the night in response.

"_I really hope not,"_ spouted the Nadder, pecking at the door of her enclosure. "_They'll take me. That has to be the reason why that young Viking is still standing right outside of my cage. I do hope he enjoys the fire I'll be burning him up with when this door opens,_" she spat, barely hiding the fear in her own growls._

_The dragons' conversation made it clear that they were far more afraid of their fate than anything else. If I gave them the same kind of out I gave Astrid, I could probably win them over to my way of thinking. _I decided, finally, to speak.

"Of course we're choosing you. My name is Hiccup, and Astrid, the girl I was with, went to go get you some fish as a peace offering. We don't plan on hurting any of you." All five cages, even the one with the terror constantly purring away, went completely dead silent. I couldn't help but smile at this; knowing their language had proven useful, and this was a perfect example.

"_Did that Viking just respond to you, Nadder?_" the Zippleback echoed first in response.

"Yes," I said quickly, "I did. I'm the only Viking on this island that can understand your language, and very well at that. I was taught by my best friend and Bond-Brother."

"_Bond-Brother? How do you know that term?_" demanded the Nightmare.

"Like I told you, I know it ****because**** I have a Bond-Brother. He's my best friend, his name is Toothless, and he's a Night Fury," I said to the once again silent arena. Conveniently, Astrid returned at that moment, carrying a small bucket with half a dozen salmon in it. I took the smallest of the fish from the bucket and walked over to the suddenly very noisy Terror. I bent down to the trap door she was scratching at and spoke.

"Hey, bud, I need to have a quiet conversation with the Nadder, so could you keep it down a little? I'll give you a fish in return." The Terror immediately began squawking and clawing even faster at her door.

"_YESYESYESYESYESYESYESFISHPLEASEIBEQUIETJUSTFISHNOWEAT!_" I couldn't help but laugh at her excitement over some salmon. With help from the chamber's lever, I unlocked the Terror's feed door, leant down and pushed it open a hair. It was enough for her to pop her head out, but not enough that she could escape.

"Here you go, girl. Take this back into your cage and enjoy it, but pay attention and please be quiet." The little Terror, eyes wide, grabbed the fish and pulled it back into her cage without a sound. I locked the door again and stood, walking over to the entrance before we began. I pulled the gate down, latched it shut and returned to the Nadder's enclosure. "I'd like every dragon here to listen to what I'm about to say very closely, alright?" I waited for a response.

"_Yes." _It came, slowly but surely, from every enclosure in the ring. Relieved once again that night, I turned back to the Nadder's door.

"Look, Nadder, I'm not a normal Viking. And even though my friend is, she's changed her mind about dragons. We're the only two people in this village who understand what's really going on here, and we want to put an end to it."

"_And what does this have to do with me, or any of us locked in here?"

You don't honestly expect six dragons and a litter of Viking children to take on a Tyrant Queen, now do you?" _

"With a little ingenuity and skill, I think it's definitely possible," I said, as I leaned against the Nadder's door. "We have a Night Fury with a Bond-Brother, so all we need at this point are some allies, which is where you all come in." The door to my back pulsed as the Nadder within let out a hefty puff of air.

"_Foolish child. Even if we wished to be bonded to your friends, the Red Death can still take control of us! Have you forgotten that?"_ she spat, the door quivering once again.

"No! In fact, I noticed something about it when I visited her nest with Toothless-"

"_You two actually saw the island?!"_ she cut me off in surprise.

"It was the three of us, actually; Astrid, the girl here with me, came along. But to the point, we were on that island for at least twenty minutes before the Queen tried sending anyone after us."

"_So we take out an iron mountain of a dragon in the few moments before her entire army rips us apart? Optimistic, this one."_

"Wrong again! As long as Toothless and I can stop her from finishing her call, then we have all the time we need. That time limit is on us, not you."

"_Viking or not, children still don't offer much confidence,"_ she said, to which I couldn't really disagree, at least where the others were concerned. "_Now, beyond that... You__ speak of that legend. You swear you were told of it by a Night Fury?"_

"Like I said before, yes. Toothless is a Night Fury, and we both share a strong bond. The kind of bond I'd like my friends to have with all of you."

"_How can we trust you?"_ I heard the Gronckle speak up.

"Because you're big, powerful, you breathe fire, and I can barely swing an axe? I'm the one taking the bigger risk here, not you. Besides, what other options do you have? You can either believe me and try to help us end this pointless war, or you can rot in that cage until a Viking trainee finally murders you."

"..._The boy has a point, I hate to say. I'd rather not die the next time I see the sun," _growled the Nightmare.

"Exactly. And all you need to do is help me fake our training sessions so I come out on top; that'll give me some leverage over the other kids. They're young, untrained, rather arrogant and a bit stupid, but they're not nearly as set in their ways as the other Vikings are. With some work, I can get them all on my side of thinking, I'm sure of it," I finished. Silence rang out once again, broken after a moment by the eerie echo of the Zippleback.

"_You really believe we can topple the Tyrant?"_

"Even if I didn't, we still have to do something. That thing is eating us out of house and home, and it's really only a matter of time before it starts sending out for villagers. I already know it eats you guys, and I don't want it to keep doing that, either. We only have one path left, and I plan on taking it even if it kills me," I said, my determination showing on my sleeve for once.

"_I still think this is foolish,"__ said the ever-defiant Nadder. "__Even if we do somehow manage to take down the Queen, what's to stop you from putting us back in here?"__ I pushed off the door as she finished, a smile on my face._

"Simple: your riders," I responded, as I stepped away from the door, turning to face it. "Consider my position: I bonded with Toothless before we knew each other at all; well before I discovered, let alone understood Dragonese. Back when I still blamed dragons for killing my mother. But now, with how things have changed between us? If anyone tried caging him, they'd have to deal with **me**," I said confidently, "and they wouldn't like it. That's the kind of bond I want for all of you."

"_Perhaps..." _The Nadder trailed off, her rumbling fading with the wind. She seemed lost in thought, which I appreciated, since my little diatribe inspired Astrid to squeeze me from behind. Per my usual reaction I'd been effectively cut off from the rest of my body, temporarily seized in place as she rested her head on my shoulder.

"You're one of the bravest Vikings to ever grace this island and you don't even know it," she whispered, tickling my ear with her breath.

"W-... What are you talking about? It's like everyone says: I'm not a real V-"

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third," Astrid stated, quickly letting me go and spinning me around to look at her, a scowl on her face. "You're planning on training a group of kids no older than sixteen to bond with dragons in secret, knowing that getting caught would mean either exile or death. Then you want to take our group to the dragon's nest and slay the their Queen by yourself. If you aren't the bravest Viking I've ever met, then you're absolutely the most insane," she finished, making me smile a little.

"I think it's a little bit of both, actually," I said, turning back to the Nadder's cage with pride. "Look, Nadder, we're not going to hurt you. We'll even get rid of our daggers, if it'd make you more comfortable."

'_Could..." __she began quietly, "__could you? I hate to admit it, but they do frighten me a little."_

"Of course!" I responded happily as I took my dagger from my belt and handed it to Astrid. "Take our daggers and slide them under the exit gate, where your axe is. She's still wary of weapons, even if they're smaller than the quills on her tail." Astrid hesitated, but did as I'd asked her to. "Alright, the daggers are gone. Will you consider it now? I think you'd make a good companion for my friend here."

"_What makes you say that?_" she responded. Taking the easy route, I played into her vanity to get her to listen.

"Simple. Nadders are known for their beauty, but they're also known for their intelligence, swiftness, and their loyalty to their allies. And my friend here," I said, Astrid walking a bit in front of me when I mentioned her, "Is exactly that: intelligent, capable, reliable and proud. One of the best fighters in our village, and she isn't even considered an adult yet. She's also..." I hesitated, my mind drifting to earlier that evening. "She's also stunningly beautiful, just like you."

Both the Nadder and Astrid went silent, and stealing a glance at Astrid proved she was blushing again. I'd only seen her like that handful of times in my life, and every time it was because of something I'd said. Part of me wondered if the Nadder was reacting the same.

"_This is really touching and all, but i__f you Vikings plan on doing anything then I'd suggest you do it quickly, because I can hear the Viking that's supposed to watch us on his way back. You've got maybe ten minutes,_" the Zippleback said in parallel.

"Sh_e's right. I can hear him, as well,_" added the Nightmare, drawing an audible sigh from the Nadder.

"_If I walk out of this door and either of you are still holding weapons, I'll kill you both. Now hurry up before I have time to regret this,_"__ she vibrated softly as I threw a fist in the air.__

"Good!" I stated, perhaps a bit more enthusiastically than I should have, "Astrid, stand in front of the door here and hold out one of those fish you have left." On my request Astrid got in position, barely holding one of the salmon in her quivering hand.

"Iuhm... I'm ready when you are," she slurred out nervously.

"You'll be totally fine, Astrid. Just think back to Toothless," I said as reassuringly as possible. "Alright, Nadder. I'm about to open your cage. We're completely unarmed and Astrid, the girl, has a few salmon for you. She just wants to be your friend, okay?" I looked over at Astrid, who was deathly pale, but still etched with determination. We locked eyes, and she nodded.

"Yes... Now o_pen the door." _On her request, I pulled the lever. Slowly, with the door unlocked, the Nadder pushed it open, eyeing both of us. She stepped cautiously up to Astrid, reminding me of Toothless on the first day I gave him a fish back at the cove. Slowly, She tilted her head down to Astrid, staring at her intently. Astrid went even more pale, if it were possible, but didn't waver in her stance as she spoke to the Nadder.

"You really are gorgeous... And if you don't trust me at all, I can understand it, believe me. You can keep that eye on me for as long as you want. I'll move the fish to your blind spot, but stay out of it myself, so you can eat." The other eye of the Nadder swiveled around to me.

_"She's willing to stay in my line of sight and leave herself open

entirely to attack? Maybe... Maybe trusting you isn't that bad an idea." _ I nearly roared in victory, but kept it in my head for the sake of everyone involved.

"Astrid, she trusts you enough to take the fish, but you'll have to hand them to her since her head is a bit wide to fit in that bucket," I said, somehow turning Astrid an even lighter shade of pale. Her determination remained, as I knew it would, and with a brief hesitation she held out a salmon to the Nadder's mouth.

"They're fresh, I-I promise. They came from the catch the docks made today." The Nadder sniffed at the fish, slowly accepting it with a lick of her beak. Astrid grabbed and held out another, repeating the action until the remaining fish were gone from the bucket, leaving them both to stare at one another. Astrid stood there in awe as she slowly reached her arm toward the dragon's snout, who flinched at her reach.

"It's okay, it's fine," I said from where I was standing. The Nadder grumbled a bit and glanced back at me before reaching her head out toward Astrid. In one small, swift motion, the girl began scratching the Nadder's jaw, drawing out a slow but obviously happy rumble. Astrid sped up a little, her smile ever-wider, when she received a chirp of approval.

"Oh...!" she said, letting a small giggle, "You know, I don't think I could hold an axe against you if I tried now. I want you to understand that when we're in dragon training together, I'll try my best to avoid doing anything to hurt you; just enough to lead them on." With a nod the Nadder chirped again, swiveling its free eye to me.

"_Tell her I'll do the same,_" she requested sincerely, to which I complied.

"Thank you," Astrid replied to my translation, "but you should probably go back into your cage now. As much as I'd love for you to stay out, that guard could be here at any second, and we'll all be in a lot of trouble - even you - If we're seen like this." The Nadder shook her head in understanding, butted her snout lightly against Astrid's stomach and walked back to her enclosure.

"_This is definitely interesting... I wonder where it will lead,_" she grumbled as she began pulling the door closed. "_And tell that girl... Astrid?"_ she continued, making a tone I took to mean her new partner, "_tell her I said 'thank you' as well."_ She shut the door entirely after that, allowing me to throw the lever back up and lock it. I turned to look at the arena, now as lifeless as it had been before our arrival, and spoke out for them all to hear.

"I'm really sorry I can't let you all out, but we're going to need to pretend we're still enemies and that this little meeting didn't happen, for obvious reason. Meaning, the next time we meet, treat us like strangers. Just don't try to kill us and we'll do the same to you."

"_Of course,_" _the Nadder replied quickly. "_We'll keep our word if you keep yours. Now get going; the guard is almost here._"

"We will. Good night," I said, with Astrid miming my farewell. We

turned on our heels, recollected our weapons and left the arena just as we found it.

"_Oh, and tell that girl... Being a Bond-Sister doesn't sound all that terrible."_

* * *

><p>Not thirty seconds after we left did the guard return to his post, smelling of seawater and looking visibly exhausted. My father was undoubtedly home and unpacked, and if the weary sentry was anything to go by, would hopefully be asleep when I returned home. Not that he had reason to suspect me of anything, but he undoubtedly knew I had full forge access and privacy for a week, and I wanted to avoid talking to him about it, for the night at least.<p>

"Hiccup," Astrid said, breaking me from my thoughts as we wandered back to Berk, "that was... Amazing. Absolutely amazing. That Nadder, she's... I'd love to fly on her some day. And could you imagine if we can actually do this? She could be free. I hope she'd stay with me..." Her voice trailed off as she dove into pleasant fantasy, a familiar look of glee on her face.

'I hate to interrupt your thoughts, but I don't think you have to worry. Right as we left, she said something to me," I said with a smile, "she likes you a little." Astrid's eyes lit up like a child's; it reminded me of her reaction to the secret she never expected Toothless to tell me. "She also said something else."

"Hmm?" she went, clearly only half-listening to me.

"She said that if this really does happen and she and the other dragons are finally free, she might consider having you as a Bond-Sister. Like how Toothless and I are Bond-Brothers?" I said with a grin, stopping Astrid in her tracks. Teasing really could be fun; it was no surprise why she did it to me.

"RR-Really? Oh, that's..." she stuttered before abandoning speech and pinning me to a wall with a hug. Letting go as quickly as she grabbed on, Astrid smirked before shoving her lips against mine. I felt the familiar sensation of flying, which only lasted for the brief moment before she pulled away and hit me on the arm.

"Ow! You know, that's starting to leave a bruise," I chastised her, a huge grin on my face.

"That's for saying you aren't a Viking," she said as she punched me again, in the same spot. "And that's for whining about a tiny flesh wound," she continued, hitting me once more with some actual force. I locked eyes with the girl for a moment, perplexed, before she turned and started walking away. It didn't take her very long to look back at me and start laughing as I caught up to her.

"What was that last one for?" I was rubbing my shoulder slowly, if only because it felt right to do.

"Because I can," she said with a yawn. "But... Hiccup, we've been gone all day, and I really should be getting home. Good luck with your father, and I'll see you tomorrow," She said as she turned to leave. I might have been pushing my luck, but I felt compelled to

stop her.

"Wait! You're breaking tradition!" I said, hoping I wasn't making a mistake, considering how things had been with her. I just couldn't help myself; being around dragons always seemed to give me a confidence boost.

"What are you talking about?" she said as she turned back to me.

"Well normally it's violence first, then affection with you. Not only did you get it backwards, but you punched me four times and I only got one small hug and a kiss," I said, drawing a quick scowl out of Astrid. It seemed to me I'd crossed a line.

"Hey, just because I punch you doesn't mean you're entitled to anything, Fishbone," she sneered, probably deservedly, at me before hitting me for what felt like the millionth time. I expected her to leave when she pulled me close and kissed me again, right by the town square. There may not have been anyone around, but getting kissed in public felt all the better, spectators or not.

"And... What was that... For?" I said in a daze.

"Making up for all of the punches. Either that or what you said. Tradition? That's why. Now good night, Hiccup!" she said, laughing as she ran off. I stood and watched her disappear behind some buildings before making for home. My shoulder was throbbing, but I didn't really notice on account of being lost in thought, my mind jumping between the girl and the Red Death.

* * *

><p>I had been wandering around the village, admiring all of the little things about it I'd never noticed, when someone punched me in the head from behind. Dazed and on the ground, I looked up to see Snotlout glancing down at me, an angry scowl on his face.<p>

"I have to clean the barn and the chicken coops for a damn MONTH because of you, AFTER being forced to clean that entire Thorforsaken Hall." He grabbed me and pulled me to my feet, only to cast me back down to the dirt with his fist.

"And STAY AWAY from Astrid. She's mine, and this entire town knows it. I don't get why she's hanging out with Hiccup the Useless, but don't let it give you any ideas," Snotlout spat at me. "You're nothing. Go back to your forest and don't come back out," he shouted, stepping on my back as he stamped off.

"You know," I growled as I pulled myself to my feet, "none of this would've happened in the first place if you could control your anger." There was blood dripping out of my nose from the punch, but it really didn't bother me. "Also, Astrid is a person. She doesn't belong to anyone, and if she ever heard you say that about her she'd kick your ass, and you know it." I normally didn't curse much, but I was tired, still reeling from that kiss and surprisingly angry despite it. "And quit acting like it's such a hassle having to clean up after the animals that feed us. I've been forced to do it more than once, and I've never complained about it like you are," I said, biting back my language as I tried calming myself down.

"Just shut it, Useless," he retorted as he knocked the wind out of me with a solid hook. "And none of this would've had to happen at all if you'd have just died instead of your mother." With that, he stormed off.

Pulling myself to my feet, I stumbled over to the nearby forge for some supplies. All I'd need to patch up my wounds were a few bandages and ointments from the storage room in the back of the forge, where my workbench was. I'd also need light and a mirror, which were back there as well.

I had two black eyes, it turned out, but my nose at least had mostly stopped dripping blood as I got to work. It took me no more than a few minutes to fix what Snotlout had done, other the stains and dirt on my clothes. There was also a small trail of red spots leading into the forge that I had to clean.

I left the candles burning at my workbench as I headed out of my workshop for some cleaning rags, grabbing a couple of steel ingots from a storage bin to press to my face on the way. Upon walking back into the forge, I nearly collided with Gobber.

"Ah, Hiccup! nasty piece'a work ya got there," he said as he looked me up and down. "I take it Snotlout ran into ya on 'is way home after gettin' his punishmen' from Stoick?" he asked, to which I grunted sarcastically.

"You could say that. I wish he'd stop doing it entirely, but at least it looks a lot worse than it feels," I grumbled, swapping out one ingot for another, much colder one.

"Well, ya hafta stan' up fer yerself," Gobber replied.

"I did! That's what got me these black eyes and this bruise on my stomach," I said, pointing down at a fist-shaped mark on my torso. "Snotlout hates me, and nothing's going to change that, but this isn't just about that knife incident," I said as I looked down at my hand; it was still bandaged, but it didn't hurt anymore. "He's also mad at me because Astrid was talking to me today, and he seems to think he owns her." Gobber rubbed his chin, looking into the air as I talked.

"Wel, it does make a lil sense if ya thin' abou' it. Good fighters make good fighter babies," he said with a grin, knowing how I'd react.

"You're real funny. Look, can we talk about something else, please?" I asked as I put the ingot down.

"That's wha' I came lookin' for ya about, actually," Gobber began. "As ya probably know, yer father docked when ya said he would. Bein' a man o' my word, I hafta give ya the smithy fer a week..." He scowled, "...but if ya burn it down yer rebuildin' it yerself, ya' got me?"

"Yes, Gobber, I understand," I said, as he replaced his oar-arm with the standard tankard.

"An' if I need ta do anything in 'ere for the village, ya hafta git

out, got it?" he stated, pointing at me with his good hand.

"Yes, Gobber, I understand," I repeated myself, as he lightly plopped his tankard on my head.

"Whacha even plannin' on buildin' tha' you need the place to yerself, anyway?" he asked, both curiously and with a note of concern, considering my track record of inventions.

"Well if I told you what I was doing, wanting privacy would be rather pointless, wouldn't it?" I responded, arms crossed and grinning again. "Don't worry about the smithy, though. I'm just working on a personal project, nothing dangerous," I tried reassuring him. It didn't work very well, as Gobber just kept staring at me with concern. "I mean it, really. I'm not going to build another dragon-fighting machine. I don't want... I don't see the point when they never work," I stuttered minutely, to which Gobber simply shrugged.

"Suit yerself. Now, I'm goin' to tha Hall. I won' be here at all tomorrow, so ya can hav it all day if yeh'd like," he said as he scratched his rear with his tankard. "Jes' don' hurt yerself, don' build anymore o' those damn machines, an' for Thor's sake, keep tha smithy in one piece," he finished, walking away with a grumble. "I never shoulda... Terrible idea... Even Stoick told me I shouldn'ta dunnit... Not worth the risk..."

"Well, at least he's gone," I said to myself in silence, grabbing some rags I'd been looking for and dipping one in some water. Pushing my bruised body back in motion, I cleaned up the spots leading to my storage-workshop, finishing with the little bit of blood there was between the two still-burning candles on the workbench.

I sat down at the cleaned(but still dirty) bench, reaching my arm for a large sketchbook I kept stuck between the bench and the wall. I pulled it from its spot and flipped it open, scanning across the plans for Toothless's newer, lighter, more durable saddle and harness. When I came to the fin itself, I couldn't help but smile.

"I wonder how Toothless will take it, seeing a new tailfin made of his own scales," I said to no one in particular. "Maybe he'd think it was gross, being made out of his own shed skin and all... But between animal leather and lighter, more durable, heatproof and fireproof dragon leather? The choice is obvious." I admired my work for a moment more before retuning the sketchbook to its place, blowing out the candles on the bench and heading home.

I took the most direct route I could back to the house, opening the door as quietly as I could when I arrived. I didn't see my father anywhere in sight, so I pulled myself into the house, shut the door and scurried up the stairs to my room as quietly as possible. If he was home I didn't want to run into him with the way that I looked, or with how tired I was.

I threw on some clean clothes, swapped out my journal for a new one and scribbled the hiding location in it as I always did. Taking a seat on my bed I took to drawing the image of Gobber's blank face for a while before my father loudly entered the house below, shaking me from my focus. It was very late, and with a yawn I closed the

journal, throwing it in the drawer of my nightstand as I lay down. Sleeping back in my own bed wasn't quite as comfortable as sleeping in the den with Toothless, but it would have to do while my father was home.

10. Forging the Future

I was awakened the next morning by light leaking through my window. The sun was just beginning to peek out over the trees of the forest near my house, meaning it was still very early. I shut my eyes again, hoping to sleep for another hour or so until I went to visit Toothless.

"HICCUP!"

Unfortunately, it didn't look like that was going to happen. Groggily, I pulled myself out of bed and stumbled over to the door of my room. Yanking it open, I shuffled out to the small balcony overlooking the hearth of our house. My father was sitting down at the table next to the it, drinking out of a tankard and ripping the flesh from a lightly burnt-looking chicken breast; he never was much of a cook.

Yawning, I ambled down the stairs, losing my footing about halfway down. This wasn't unheard of, especially in the mornings; I'd always been a bit clumsy. Rather than bouncing to the floor, as I usually would, I spun around and caught myself on the steps with both hands.

"...Nice catch," my father said as I finished my descent. He was eyeing me suspiciously, and it didn't take him long for him to notice what'd happened to me the night before.

"What happened to yer face, Hiccup?" he said, sounding both angry and concerned(but mostly angry). I rubbed the bruise on my cheek where Snotlout's fist made contact and walked up to him.

"Oh, you know, the usual. I was minding my own business and Snotlout decided to take his anger out on me," I said casually, drawing an upset sigh from my father.

"Hiccup, you really need to learn how to defend yourself, otherwise this sort of thing's just going to keep happening," he said, pulling more meat from his chicken.

"Well, I probably could've avoided it if I'd seen it coming. He started out by punching me in the back of the head," I said, rubbing the spot in question. "He's not... Gonna get any more punishments... Is he?" I said slowly. I'd rather my father do nothing, since Snotlout would just take his frustration out on me... Again.

"Of course not. I can't fight all of your battles for you," he replied, gulping down the contents of his tankard. "That's the point of putting you in training with the other kids: to toughen you up. It'll put some hair on that chest of yours," he finished, tossing the chicken bones into the hearth as he stood. "Now, Hioccup," my father began, looking down at me sternly.

"Y-Yeah, Dad?" I stammered in response.

"Your bet with Gobber was pretty brazen of ya. Never imagined you'd be the wagering type," he replied, a small smirk crossing his face for just a moment. "But that doesn't mean it was a good idea. I'll approve of it, just this once. But you're not to be in the forge unsupervised by Gobber after this unless we can be sure you won't burn it down. Again." A vague memory of accidentally burning down a wall of the forge when I was ten crossed my mind.

"Well, hey, that's not exactly fair, you know. I was ten years old and didn't know what I was doi-"

"That's not the point, Hiccup."

"But I was a kid-"

"It took us two days to fix the damage, and we almost couldn't use it during the raid that had happened on the _same night_."

"This is different, though. I know what I'm doing no-"

"Son, this is serious. Every time you're in that building alone, disaster falls. Unless someone's watching you I can't be sure that you won't cause another fire or something else when you're building whatever it is you're building. So I'm adding a term to your little bet," he said. I really didn't like where our conversation was heading.

"And that would be?" I moaned, hoping he wouldn't say what I had a feeling he would.

"Someone else has to be with you, even if it's not Gobber," he demanded, trampling the entire point of having privacy while I worked on Toothless's riding tack.

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose of asking for privacy?" I retorted.

"The well being of the smithy is more important than you having any privacy in it."

"But if I can't work in private then there's no reason to have the forge to myself like this at a-"

"Hiccup, someone has to watch you."

"Are you even listening to me? I have my reasons for the secrecy, dad, and I don-"

"HICCUP! Either you have someone with you or you drop the bet," he said with purpose. Clearly he wasn't listening, and arguing my point would only cause me even more trouble. With a slight growl I pinched the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger, just above where it was still tender.

"So, whose time am I going to waste today?" I said, as my mind searched for something else I could do in the forge with my wasted access. If it wouldn't be in private I still had to think of something to cover my story with, since I couldn't exactly go through with making a better riding harness for Toothless.

"I'm letting you choose that one, as long as they're fine with spending their time watching you," he said, perking my spirits immediately. "But I have to okay them first," he added.

"Um... Astrid?" I said hopefully. As long as I could have her, then working on a saddle for Toothless would still be possible. However, I didn't consider how that would appear to my father, and only realized it when he started smiling through his beard.

"Well, Son! Didn't think you'd have it in ya to want privacy with a girl like Astrid! Though, I've been hearing stories from a certain one legged drunk that you've been spending a 'wee bit o' time' with the girl," he spouted, chuckling a bit to himself. "Yes, she'll do, I suppose. She can keep the rest of her lot in line, so I'm certain she can handle you," he finished with.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I scoffed, ignoring the irony of those words coming from my mouth. My father ignored the comment and continued.

"Well, I'll go and tell her she's got a job for today. She'll meet you by the forge, but you're not to go in until she's with you, deal?" he requested firmly.

"Deal," I replied. There might have been a smile on my face, but my voice, for once, didn't let on how excited I was.

"I'll be heading to the Hofferson's in about an hour to tell her she has to meet you, so you've got that long to get ready," my father said as he opened the door, "so you might want to eat somethin'. An' please, please be careful, Hiccup," he finished, giving me a nod of farewell as he shut it behind him. Taking his advice I grabbed a chunk of bread from the table, crunching away at it as I roasted over the hearth a fish he left for me.

While it cooked, I walked over to one of the shields dad kept mounted to the wall. It was made of steel and polished to a mirror shine, casting my reflection back at me. My nose was red, but unbroken, and the two black eyes I had just made me look really tired. I was satisfied enough that I didn't look too beaten up, and actually kind of proud of how little it bothered me.

As I turned back to the hearth it dawned on me that I didn't have very much time to eat, so after choking down the rest of the bread and seasoning the fish with some spices from a nearby cabinet, I threw on my boots and left. I'd have to eat my skewered fish on the way to the cove.

* * *

><p>Another painful sprint later, I was catching my breath near a boulder by the lake. Toothless, who was lying in our den, noticed me and ran over, carrying in his mouth the net and his flying gear. Wordlessly I threw it on him, climbed up and we shot off into the blue.<p>

The morning sky, as it often did, smacked me upside the face with wakefulness. Its winds tousled my hair, bit at my eyes and whipped my clothes about; its sun warming me despite the cold air. After a bit

of joyriding and another freefall, Toothless and I soared to our usual fishing spot. With a few powerful blasts and a bit of skimming with the net, we'd caught a few dozen fish for Toothless's breakfast. It didn't take us long to haul it back to the cove where we were surprised to see Astrid waiting for us.

"I wasn't expecting this!" I shouted as I jumped from the saddle.

"I ran into your father just after I walked out of the house. He's busy doing his Chiefly duties, but made sure to let me know before he left that I have to 'supervise' you in the forge just in case you burn it down," she said with a smirk and something else in her eye. "Hiccup, as funny as I think this is, I can't still help but feel like your dad needs some more faith in you."

"Finally, someone says it," I replied, smiling as I usually did.

"Someone had to; you're clumsy, not stupid," Astrid said as she walked over to Toothless and I, clearly studying the marks on my face. "Oh, and I heard about Snotlout attacking you yesterday... Are you alright?" she asked, in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

"Please, I've done worse to myself on Toothless than he's done to me. And the funny thing about it all is, if I'd seen it coming, I could've easily dodged all of his attacks," I boasted. Astrid didn't seem to agree, considering her expression.

"What makes you think that? You may have tamed a dragon, but you still can't fight," she stated playfully.

"Simple. Or did you forget one of the first things I told you about Toothless the night I brought you here?" I asked, sinking the girl into thought.

"I remember it pretty much all word for word, to be honest. I will ****never**** forget that night, but even so I don't remember you saying anything about being taught to fight," she said inquisitively.

"Because I didn't. I told you Toothless taught me how not to need to fight, and every day that passes helps to prove it," I said, as Astrid waited for me to continue. "I've been ruthlessly destroying most of my muscles over the past month by means of vigorous flying on Toothless, and it's definitely paying off. My strength and reaction time have never been better; I just need to be more situationally aware," I claimed, to which Astrid just looked confused. "I mean... I need to pay more attention to my surroundings," I clarified, making her frown at me.

"Hiccup, I understood what you said the first time. I'm not stupid," she said, making me feel apologetic for underestimating her, "I was just thinking that I'm only as aware as I am from years of honing my skills with an axe. Maybe I should teach you how to fight with a weapon someday," Astrid said with a bit of excitement in her voice.

"That might not be a bad idea. It'd be fitting, too, since I'll be teaching you how to train your Nadder," I reminded her, my words

spreading her eyes open wide.

"Oh, you have no idea how much I'm looking forward to that," she said as she turned to Toothless, who was now lying nearby with an oversized fish head in his mouth. "I want to do what you two do. But... How are we going to get to them? We can't exactly train dragons in the arena, since there's always at least one person watching," Astrid reminded me. I'd been thinking about how to deal with that issue since the idea to train the dragons first entered my head, but the solutions I'd come up with weren't very good.

"That's not so simple. I've got something in mind, but we'll need the twins on our side, first," I said as I crossed my arms.

"Easier said than done," Astrid replied. "They don't listen to anyone, let alone you."

"I know, but they'd be our best bet for distracting the sentry while we met with the dragons. Even with their help, we'd be limited to the dragons' enclosures so no one would hear us, which isn't nearly enough space. It'd be one thing if I could sneak them out of the ring entirely without having to worry they'd run away," I said, as my mind drifted back to the forge. "But we can talk about that later; I have a job to do. Toothless," I said, turning my eye to the dragon lolling about on the floor.

"_You're leaving finally?"_ he grumbled, waving one of his upended paws at us. "_Well, have fun working today."_

"For the love of Thor are you lazy," I said, throwing a hand on my hip. "Not even gonna give me a hug goodbye?"

"_We could hug just as well down here. And you're one to talk, mister wake-me-up-every-day. You'd have missed at least half of those meetings without my help,_" Toothless grumbled back at me, his tongue now hanging out of his mouth.

"I know, I know," I said as I laughed. "Besides, like rider like dragon, right?"

"_I guess that's a convenient excuse,_" he vibrated.

"Convenient as any. Anyway, I'll see you later, Toothless. I've got a week's worth of free, unquestioned forge access and the only person allowed in while I work is Astrid. With any luck, your new riding harness should be done this time next Odin's Day," I stated, to which Toothless grinned.

"_The two of you, unsupervised and alone, in that building? Oh, I have a feeling you'll need a lot more than a week to finish my new tailfin, if that's the case,_" Toothless mockingly jeered. Astrid might not have understood what he said, but could probably gather it from my reaction.

"TOOTHLESS! That's- you shouldn't have- why would you _**say**_ that?"

"_Easy! Your reactions are always priceless. Now get going; I'll be fine here,_" he finished as he closed his eyes. I sighed and laughed, dragging my hand across the forearm of his upended wing as I walked

by. Astrid said goodbye to him as well, rubbing Toothless just between the eyes before catching up to me.

* * *

><p>"So you want to tell the twins first?" Astrid asked, returning to our previous conversation as we entered the forest. "Hiccup, both of them kinda still hate you, knife-catching or not. How do you plan on getting around that?" she asked, understandably.<p>

"I'm well aware, which is why I'm not starting with them," I said as I crossed my arms. "They'll be more manageable when I start winning in the ring, but even before that I want talk to Fishlegs first," I said, as Astrid nodded beside me.

"He is the least-likely to succeed, now that you can talk to dragons," she replied.

"Exactly. Even with his memorization of the dragon manual, Fishlegs and I are basically in the same boat; as far as he knows, at any rate. I think he might wholeheartedly embrace the idea of training with dragons rather than against them if he knew it was an option," I reasoned.

"HHHHHhe'd rather read or talk about them more than anything," Astrid stated plainly, "which might come in handy for us."

"Oh, I think it definitely will. Fishlegs and I have similar interests, so I can probably find common ground in drawing and writing about dragons. I've also noticed he has a strange obsession with Gronckles, so I might pair him up with the one in the ring."

"He's not the only one with strange obsessions," Astrid quickly quipped.

"So you've noticed it, too?" I asked. "They might be kinda cute together, even if they are basically polar opposites."

"Probably because they're polar opposites," Astrid replied. "So if we can pull in Fishlegs, make him look more competent and hide the dragon manual from him, Ruff might follow. She really only hates how much time he spends reading what he's already memorized; everything else about him seems to be fine. He's also not Snotlout, which is a plus," Astrid remarked, making us both grin.

"Well that is an option, but wouldn't it be easier for you to just speak to her?" I asked in earnest. "Aren't you two friends? I mean, you're the only two girls our age in the village," I stated; the nearest generation to us was a group of 20-somethings that were mostly seafarers.

"We used to be, but I haven't really seen her in a while. Like I told you, I've spent basically all of my time training," Astrid said, her face falling a tad. "And now all that time... feels kinda wasted."

"It shouldn't," I replied quickly, noting how frustrated she was becoming. "It's part of who you are to want to be a warrior, Astrid. And Berk still needs competent fighters to defend the village from

all kinds of raiders, even if they don't fly or breathe fire. Your training wasn't for nothing, and it won't be in the future, either. Never stop working on it."

"...Thanks, Hiccup," Astrid said, bumping me lightly on the shoulder.

"And don't forget your dragon! Nadders are as strong as they are vain; she's not going to want a weakling as a rider," I said, bringing the smile back to Astrid's face. "But, back to Ruffnut... Maybe it's time to restart that friendship. Even if Fishlegs could get her attention, he's just as clumsy around women as I a-er... Well, was, I guess," I stammered, as Astrid shook her head with that grin of hers. "Oh, come on; I'm getting better! I haven't even stuttered your name in days," I replied.

"Well, I'll have to see if I can't make you do that again," Astrid retorted with a wink. We were barely to the village outskirts, let alone the smithy, and I had already begun feeling uncomfortably warm; not that I minded.

"R- uh, right. We'll... You can do that, I guess. Not like I can stop you," I mumbled, hoping to get back on topic while I could. "Regardless, if we can get Ruff, then Tuff will eventually follow. The trick would just be convincing them, but that might not be as hard as I'd initially thought."

"They do love causing mayhem and breaking rules; having their own dragon would play right into that," Astrid agreed. The twins were the worst troublemakers Berk had ever seen, and for once I saw it as a saving grace.

"After that, the only one left to win over is Snotlout."

"...Do we have to?" Astrid asked, her comment drawing a snort out of my throat. "He's such a pain in the ass. And how do you plan on getting ****him**** to not want to kill dragons? He's a coward, but he's even more excited about training than I was."

"Simple: once we have the twins, I'll have them throw him in the Nightmare's cage as a prank," I said, while Astrid stifled a laugh. "My thoughts exactly. I really doubt she'd kill him, especially after she starts getting jealous of the other dragons, and anything less probably wouldn't get through that skull of his to convince him. Either way, he's only coming out when he agrees with us." We shared some more laughter as we approached the smithy, Astrid stopping us just before we got inside.

"One more thing, Hiccup... Why do you always use that word?" she asked, genuine curiosity on her face.

"What word?"

"'Simple,'" she replied, drawing out of me another sarcastic smile.

"_Simple._ Nothing I do is simple. And I have an appreciation for irony," I said as we entered the building.

* * *

><p>"You mean to tell me this actually makes sense to you?" Astrid asked from her seat on the workbench near the forge. She was going over my reworked tailfin and saddle plans, but was clearly quite lost by them. "I don't understand anything in this plan beyond it being a new riding tack for your dragon," she said in confusion.<p>

"That it does," I said as I organized the tools I'd be using. "The redesign is mostly to address little problems, like how Toothless doesn't like how the saddle rubs him, or how the handgrips aren't positioned very well... I've also reworked the saddle itself so it's more accommodating for passengers," I said, pointing to a finished set of detachable stirrups sitting near the workshop.

"You've been pretty busy, even without me watching you," Astrid said as she looked over my handiwork.

"Yep. I've spend many a sleepless night in here, and for good reason: the new tailfin and saddle are going to be made of Toothless's own scales. I've been screwing around with them for several weeks worth of nights and finally figured out how to make something useful. And not just useful, but also fireproof, unbelievably durable and long lasting. Including," I stalled as I pulled out another blueprint, "A tunic." Astrid's eyes lit up when she saw the design, a reaction I wasn't expecting.

"You figured out how to make a dragonscale tunic? Hiccup, that's genius!" she cheered, to my utter glee. "Why hasn't anyone else thought to make leather out of dragon hide?" I'd once gone looking for an answer to that question myself, eventually finding it in a hunting guidebook.

"I'm sure many people have, but the problem is that tanning a dragon's hide is actually impossible. If you try to do it like you would a sheep's fur, it'll just fall apart," I said as I added fresh coals to the hearth and pumped the bellows. "It's a very difficult process, since you have to anchor the scales properly together, not unlike like the shingles of a roof, while they're extremely hot." I grabbed a piece of metal I'd set out for myself as I spoke, dunking it into the waiting fires of the hearth so I could work it. I glanced to Astrid as I waited, finding her with an odd look of content on her face.

"... Hiccup, that head of yours is quickly becoming one of my favorite things about Berk. There's always something new coming out of it," she said as she jumped off the forge table and walked over to where I was standing. Without hesitation, she kissed me on the cheek.

"A-And that was for?" I stuttered, as she was clearly hoping for.

"Because I punched you earlier and didn't follow up on 'tradition,' as you called it," she replied, bringing a smile to my face as I began working. I couldn't help but keep on grinning like an idiot the entire time I hammered away at the red steel, eventually turning it into saddle framing.

"Well it didn't take very long, but that's the last piece," I said, dunking the hot steel into a nearby cooling barrel. The sputtering

fizz of boiling water filled the forge as I continued speaking. "I'd all but finished that the last time I was in here past midnight. Now I just need to knit those scales together..." I said with a sigh. It was a long and tedious job, and one I was inexperienced with at that.

"Wait. I thought you needed this week to make Toothless's harness? You're telling me the frame is already done?" she asked in apparent confusion.

"Yeah, but the frame is the easy part. Knitting dragon leather is an entirely different story," I said, as I upturned a bucket of slightly dull black scales into the hearth. They slowly began shimmering as they roasted on the open coals, eventually glistening as though they were wet. "Dragon scales. Fascinating stuff," I commented.

"Can I help?" Astrid asked as she watched the scales intently. As much as I'd have liked another set of hands, the work was too intricate for them to be anything more than an obstacle. Scale knitting wasn't something I'd accomplish with the assistance of anything but time and patience.

"No, not really. But even so, I do appreciate your company," I said, as I began pressing two scales together. "I was actually kinda hoping you might drop by before I found out I'd be getting the day alone in here with you." Astrid's telling grin returned, and for a moment I wondered what she had waiting for me.

"Were you planning on something?" she asked.

"Other than working on Toothless's new riding tack? No, I can't say that I had anything on my mind. I figured you'd make it interesting; you know, like you always do," I replied.

"I can make it interesting if you want. Maybe by embarrassing you for my amusement?" Astrid suggested as her grin widened. "Oh, there's an idea. Embarrassing stories!"

"We're about to spend the next couple of hours talking about me repeatedly making a fool of myself, aren't we?" I wondered out loud, to which Astrid lightly hit me.

"I don't mean only you, Hiccup. I've done some stupid things too, you know," she admitted, which definitely piqued my interest.

"Oh _really?_ Maybe this won't be so terrible... But I'm still glad Toothless isn't here to hear it," I said, as I wiped a bit of sweat out of my eyes.

* * *

><p>Four rather humiliating hours later, I'd knit together about a quarter of the tailfin. I hadn't even started on the rest of the tack, but with long the fin was taking it'd probably be waiting for a few days.<p>

Time dripped past us slowly, and in an effort to ignore its minor trickle we talked about our past mistakes. My list, being a clumsy blacksmith and inventor, was very extensive: burning down parts of the forge, damaging houses, causing minor injuries, accidentally

helping captured dragons escape... I could probably have filled a manual of things to avoid doing, if most of them didn't uniquely apply to me.

Astrid, on the other hand, generally only had stories involving the normal growing pains of being raised on Berk: What are dragons, Oh Gods why do dragons exist, when do I stop having nightmares about dragons, and 'mommy, why does daddy have a hook instead of a hand?' However, there were some small exceptions, even with a girl like her, including something I never would've guessed until recently.

"I can't believe this. You actually tried to keep a dragon as a _pet?_ Sure, it was a baby Terror, but it's still a fire-breathing dragon," I said in amused shock. "Then again, I already knew you wanted a pet Nadder, so I guess this shouldn't come as too much a surprise. " Astrid was still laughing, but spoke through it regardless.

"Hey! Like I said, I was a child and it was cute. Emerald green, too; you know, my favorite color?" She chuckled, picking up a dagger from a box of scrap near where she was sitting and playing with it. "But lets get back to what you said before! You actually have a hard time sleeping in your bed now because you're not being used as a stuffed lamb for a dragon?" Astrid teased as she flipped the rusty blade. "Hiccup, don't look at me like that, I'm not laughing at you!"

"Could've fooled me," I said with false annoyance, "and if so, what are you laughing at?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but... It's just, well, you. It's you; this is all Hiccup. It's so 'Hiccup,' it's funny," she said as she stood from her seat on the workbench.

"I'm... Not following you," I said, as I pulled my attention away from the annoyance sitting in the hearth, "what are you talking about?"

"I'm laughing because I'm finally getting to know what makes you tick," Astrid replied as she poked me in the forehead, "and it's almost as exciting as the idea of flying Stormfly."

"Wait, 'Stormfly?' You've known her for all of one day and you're already giving the Nadder a name?" I asked, my attention now far and away from my work on the coals. "Yet again, this is surprising. Was that the name you planned to give your pet Nadder? Oh, or maybe that's what you named the Terror?"

"No... I called the Terror 'Greenie,' and the pet Nadder idea never had a name. I came up with 'Stormfly' just for her, and I think it suits her well," Astrid replied; a sentiment I agreed with. She continued, her smile slowly faltering, "I mean... I really shouldn't get too attached to her or anything, considering how wrong this could all go, but I clearly already have, haven't I?"

"You have, but bonding is the main thing we're going... To be doing..." I began, my voice coming to a halt as I realized something. "Wait, did you say you think learning about me is e-uh, exciting?" I stammered.

"Well, yeah. You're like a walking puzzle, and I've always liked those," she admitted without hesitation. "You know, I think I'm beginning to resent myself for letting you get away from me for seven years. All this reminiscing makes me feel like life would've been a lot more fun if I were there, screwing up with you instead of looking down on you for it," she said softly. "But I don't plan on making the same mistake twice, so you're stuck with me looking out for you. Got it, pal?" she added with a light tap on my shoulder.

"I can't say I mind," I said as a different thought came to me. "But, on the subject of looking out for each other... I've been doing the same for you, in my own way," I said, as Astrid cocked her head in apparent confusion. "I mean... I've been in this forge since I was six, and you've been training since about as long. Do you remember your first axe? The one you were given for your tenth birthday?"

"Yeah," she replied, crossing her arms in thought, "I'm pretty sure I cracked the blade in half not six months later. What about it?"

"I made that axe more or less by myself, with a little assistance from Gobber. In fact, I've made all four of the axes you've used, and I tried my best to make each one better than the last. That's mostly the reason why I knew you needed a new handle," I admitted with a bit of embarrassment, which I noticed Astrid reflecting; she reminded me of Toothless after rolling through Dragon Nip. "I've been taking care of all of you in my own way, actually; I made the other kids' weapons, too. But I always gave yours... A little extra time," I finished, as I tried to focus back on the job I was in the smithy for.

As much as I enjoyed the company, I felt a bit awkward for saying as much as I did to her for the past several hours. Then again, I only had a few moments to think about it before two things happened: someone banging on the entrance to the smithy, and Astrid pulling me unceremoniously to the floor.

"HICCUP! Time to get yerself an' Astrid to the Mead Hall! Heheheh..." my father interrupted, before stamping away with a laugh. We weren't being loud enough for him to have heard what we were saying, but the fact that he was so close to our conversation at all left me almost as nervous as the position Astrid had me in: helplessly pinned to the floor. And from the look in her eyes, she'd intended to take advantage of that fact.

"Damn," she huffed out, mostly proving my assumption, "I guess we probably... Really should get going," she stammered as she helped me back to my feet. "And, Uh, Hiccup... Sorry about- about that. Don't know what came over me," Astrid added as I hurriedly cleaned up the mess I'd made.

"I'm... not complaining," I managed to say while stashing the tailfin, frame and anything else potentially incriminating in my workshop. Astrid gave me a hand, and with the cover of the cloth door blocking us from the rest of the smithy, kissed me when we were done. It was quick and sweet, and before I knew it we'd finished and were silently walking to the Hall together.

* * *

><p>Astrid and I spent a few hours with Toothless after eating in the Hall. We made sure to leave at different times and meet in the forest to avoid suspicion, considering the eyes already on the both of us thanks to my bet with Gobber.<p>

With how annoying dragonscale knitting could definitely be, pacing myself became incredibly important. Taking it all on at once would inevitably lead to mistakes, the likes of which I couldn't really afford with the time limit I had. As such, I turned to Toothless for some relaxation one could only find in the air, and stayed there until just before sundown.

Astrid had quickly acclimated to flying after only two outings, even with how the first one ended. She talked at length about wanting to learn as much as she could; about training with Stormfly so she could take to the air herself. I spent nearly the entire walk back to the smithy in silence, just listening to her go on and on about how amazing it was to take to the sky.

"You know," I began, breaking my own silence for the first time since we left the cove, "you sound a lot like how I remember you when were kids. It's nice to see you so excited about the future compared to how you were before. It's, uh... It's cute," I said, hoping she wouldn't hate my using that word to describe her. To my surprise she simply began laughing and, with a soft blow to the arm, grabbed my hand. Her grip firm, she began pulling my stumbling form through the remaining trees, leading me to what work I still had waiting for me. Luckily for both of us, the village was largely empty where we were on account of the time, so we went unnoticed.

Astrid pulled her hand from mine as we entered the forge, taking her seat on the bench as she glanced around at its tools. I recollected the necessary supplies, threw the half-finished tailfin back on the hearth and started pumping its bellows. Once the scaled fin was glistening I went back to work, getting lost in its tediousness.

"Hiccup, I was thinking..." Astrid began, interrupting the prolonged silence with her voice, "I might not kill him, but I still think I should beat the ever-loving Hel out of Snotlout for hurting you," she remarked, making me drop what I was doing and quickly spin around to her.

"No! I mean, thank you for the thought, but it's really not... That's a bad idea. If you make him angry, he'll just take his frustrations out on me like he always has," I quickly exclaimed. "Rather than retaliate like he wants, I need to win his respect. And to do that," I said, as I returned to the tailfin, "I plan on making him think I can command dragons to eat him." Astrid snorted in response, segueing quickly into a small bout of laughter that I could help but get distracted by.

"Hiccup! That wasn't what I was expecting at all. I might even call it a little cruel, not that he doesn't deserve it," she chortled happily. "Let me know if you need any help; I'd be glad to lend a hand."

"Yeah, that doesn't come as a surprise," I said as I quietly burned a finger on the tailfin, "I don't think it's too mean of me to make him sweat for a few minutes, considering how he's treated me for most of

my life. I might be easy-going, but even I can get angry, you know?"

"I'm aware, Hiccup," Astrid said as she slipped off of the counter. "But seriously, you do need to learn how to fight. Even if it's not Snotlout, someone's eventually going to want a piece of you; that's just the way life is." She walked over to me, grabbing my left hand with a bit of gentle force and looking at the fresh burn on my ring finger. "You either prepare, or you suffer the consequences," she added as she pulled a small container from her pocket. In it was a faintly green balm that she spread on the burn, cooling it quickly.

"Oh, uh... Thanks," I said, as she gently rubbed my finger. "I guess I could flesh out some weapon designs I already made for myself, see where it leads me..."

"That's the spirit! If you're teaching me how to fly, it's only fair I teach you how to fight, isn't it?" Astrid asked as she began wandering the smithy curiously. "Whatever you create for yourself, I want it to be the best you can do; and the best fit for you, as well. Something light, durable, and long enough to give you range but not hurt your speed. And consider that a personal request, so forge it like you'd forge me an axe," she finished, now standing across the hearth from me with her eyes drilling into mine as I worked.

"Fair enough," I huffed, blowing some sweat from my nose as I did, "but I'm already too busy to do it now, so it'll have to wait until after Dragon Training ends." Across the coals, Astrid nodded in silent agreement.

"Which I nearly forgot is tomorrow, now that you mention it. Are you ready? I mean, the dragons will hopefully keep their word, but if they don't you're not going to know until they attack. And on top of that, we're going to be in that ring with both Gobber and your father. They're bound to be watching your every move, and if anything goes wrong they'll definitely notice. How are you going to avoid that?" she wondered aloud. I'd been ignoring this particular problem since realizing it myself, mostly out of a desire to not waste time worrying.

"Toothless has taught me enough about dragons to keep from being killed if our agreement isn't honored, so I'm not too worried about that. As for those two..." I stalled, taking a moment both to think and press in a particularly stubborn scale, "...I think we'll be okay as long as I don't make it obvious, so I'll just stick to running away unless I'm told otherwise."

"And if that doesn't work and they figure out you're cheating?"

"It depends on how they react, but if they decide I'm colluding with the dragons, I'll have no choice but to leave. There's a cache of supplies hidden in the den, just in case, and I have an escape plan to get me in the forest from most anywhere in the village," I admitted, while nearly burning myself again. "Damn scales... But if that does happen, you'll have to take my place with training the others. It's the only option we have whether I'm here or not, so someone has to do it."

"Hiccup, I can't-"

"Stop right there. Yes, you can," I stated matter-of-factly. "I started learning about Toothless without a single idea of what I was doing. You, however, have experience going into this. Training isn't the hard part; it's keeping everything quiet that'll be difficult. Therein lies the advantage you have over me: no one questions your motives, especially with dragons, so they're a lot less likely to suspect anything of you," I reasoned understandably, to which Astrid grinned.

"You're right about that. Could you imagine the uproar the village would have if they caught me instead of you?" she asked, a point I hadn't considered.

"They'd either wholeheartedly agree or burn the entire island to the ground, and would be completely insane in either case. But that'd only be possible if I was exiled, which probably won't happen. Probably," I repeated, mostly to stave off any sense of dread for training. "But if it does... I believe in you," I added quickly.

"...Thanks, Hiccup. I'm glad you're not too beat up over this, since I know it must be stressful," Astrid yawned, briefly stretching while she couldn't speak. "And remember: Once dragon training is over, weapon training begins."

"I won't forget," I said, as I began cleaning up for the night. "I'll draw up some ideas, take some measurements, consider what materials to use, and then make two of them. One for fighting, and one for training. Last thing I want to do is swing a sharpened sword at my gir- uh... friend," I corrected my stupid self, which Astrid clearly noticed.

"Nice save," she started with a grin before moving on, "but you've got a good point about making a practice version of it, too. Sparring with sharpened weapons is never a good idea, tradition or not," Astrid said, in reference to an old Berk custom that ended after someone particularly young accidentally cut off one of their own feet.

"Sometimes I wonder how I could've possibly been produced by this island," I questioned aloud while pulling the tailfin from the hearth.

"I've been wondering the same thing myself," Astrid commented as she stared at the tailfin now cooling in my gloved hand. "Hiccup... It's beautiful," she added, which I couldn't help but agree with. Sleek black, with the same dimensions as the leather version, it was still shining from the forge's coals. The scales overlapped one another almost perfectly, protecting the heat-sensitive framing they would eventually be mounted to.

"Isn't it? It's almost a shame I won't be able to show anyone other than the two of you," I said as I admired my own work. "I'm about halfway done, but I definitely love how it looks already. At the pace I'm going I might complete it after another day or so, leaving me with another four to work on the saddle," I said, stealing a glance to my workshop where the frame was hidden. "I wonder how that'll turn out, or how Toothless will like it."

"I'm sure he'd be happy with anything, especially if it's better than what you're currently using," Astrid guessed. She was probably right, since Toothless didn't say anything while I was collecting the scales to begin with, but I was still curious.

"In any case, it's still one of the most impressive things I've done so far," I boasted. "Like it or not, this is his new tailfin."

"What about training a dragon and learning his language in two days? Aren't they more impressive?" Astrid playfully mocked.

"I guess they probably are, at least a little," I said as I hid the now cool(but still shiny) tailfin in my workroom, following Astrid out of the smithy when I was done. "I am absolutely exhausted; between forging, riding Toothless and getting hit by you, especially, my body just sort of... Aches."

"Well that's your own fault," Astrid said, as she hit me once again and then kissed me on the cheek. It was beginning to feel like she did it just to see how I'd react, and I hoped to myself she'd never get bored of it. "If you hadn't absolutely terrified me by jumping off of Toothless without telling me that it was a regular thing you did, you wouldn't be having this problem right now," she added in truth.

"What? I trust him and he trusts me. I figured it'd be obvious to you that that was just another stunt; we've done it dozens of times by now. Oh, and you definitely need to try it some day... In fact, it'll probably be part of Dragon Training, as a trust exercise." Astrid looked absolutely mortified by the idea, but a rider still needed to be prepared. "Don't give me that look. If you're not ready for the chance of being thrown off of your dragon when it happens, and it ****will**** eventually happen, you might not react properly," I said, as Astrid closed her eyes and shook her head.

"I know, Hiccup. But it's still... Well, a terrifying thought. If you hadn't been caught in time..."

"Astrid, Toothless would never let me drop. Besides, we were waaaay too high in the air for that to happen," I added.

"Hiccup, I was too busy worrying that you were about to die to notice how high up we were!" she excitedly shouted. "I was afraid I was about to lose my-" she stopped, having caught herself just barely after claiming me as hers.

"...You know, being on this side of the fence for once is pretty interesting, I must say," I replied. I could've played with her a bit, but instead decided to just laugh and hug her. "Thank you for worrying about me like I've worried about you in the past. At least now we're finally on the same page," I said, as she hugged me back for a moment in the darkness outside of her house.

"Hiccup... Look, just get going home and forget I said that for now. Here," she said with a quick kiss, "now you have something else to think about. Keep your mind on that, ok?" With a wave she entered her house, leaving me with my thoughts in the night of the island.

* * *

><p>I was deep in my own mind as I arrived home, and hoped my father would either be out or asleep as I entered. I was wrong on both counts, as it looked like he'd been waiting up for me.<p>

"Hiccup," he greeted. He didn't sound upset or angry; more concerned than anything else.

"Yeah, Dad?" I asked, hoping what he had to say wouldn't take long; I was dead on my feet.

"Good luck tomorrow, and don't forget to wear your helmet," he reminded me. It was just what I was looking forward to: wearing half of my mother's breastplate on my head. At least it looked rather nice on me.

"Thanks, Dad. But don't, you know... Worry. I'll be fine," I awkwardly stated; our conversations had always been stilted.

"I'll be making sure of it. Now get some sleep, Hiccup; you look dead on your feet," he told me as he stood up, heading to his own room. "Good, uh, good talk, and... Good night."

"You, too," I replied as I trudged up the stairs to my room. With that awkward situation out of the way, I collapsed into the furs of my bed, pulling a wool sheet over my body. I passed out immediately, my head too full of blueprints and memories of Astrid to bother with worrying over what the rising sun would bring.

11. Fortune Smiles Upon Thee

A/N: _I apologize for the delay, but this chapter is a lot longer than my previous ones, so at least there's that._

_Anyway, time for training, then Fishlegs.
>

* * *

><p>I slept in a little that morning, knowing I could safely do so and still be at Dragon Training when I needed to. Looking out of my window to see the time, I pulled myself from my bed, entering the cold air of the late morning. Donning my usual bearskin and boots, I grabbed a bit of bread and left the house. Walking my way toward the kill ring, my nerves finally began to show themselves. I knew I had to do this, but more importantly, I knew what was at stake if I didn't.<p>

I turned my mind to Toothless and this pointless war, and used that as a confidence boost. It might not have ripped the weight from my shoulders, but it was comforting in its own right. At the very least, it was keeping me from doing anything but walk to my destination while mindlessly finishing my bread. I wasn't really thinking about anything, or of where I was going. I just knew my legs would take me to where I needed to go while the rest of me tried to keep my brain from thinking about what I'd be doing in a few minutes. Luckily for me, that didn't stop my brain from noticing a rock flying my way. It gave me just enough time to spin my body out of the way of the projectile, the sensation of it flying past my chest quickly letting me know that Snotlout had finally missed his intended

target.

Looking up ahead I saw him, Fishlegs, the twins and Astrid all standing by the entrance to the kill ring. Snotlout looked irritated that I'd dodged his attack, but the rest of them looked at me strangely, not understanding how I'd done something so very unlike me yet again. Except Astrid. To my delight, she was glaring at Snotlout, an absolutely infuriated look on her features. He didn't notice. I did, however, and it managed to put a smile on my face.

"What are you so happy about, Useless?" He shouted at me, a noticeable indignation in his voice. "You don't have any reason to be in a good mood. Once we get in there, that Gronckle is gonna tear you apart." Finally within reach of the group, I looked up at Snotlout.

"How do you know they're using the Gronckle?" I asked. Oddly enough, just knowing what dragon we'd be using was helping my nerves. I was wondering how good the Gronckle's hearing was when Fishlegs piped up.

"Oh, I've read about this in the Dragon Manual. Gronckles are traditionally used first because they're small enough for a single trained Viking to handle, but still deadly enough to put up a decent fight against new recruits." He took a breath and continued. "But that doesn't mean Gobber or the Chief have to follow tradition, but knowing them, they probably will." For once I could say I was really grateful for Fishlegs's library of a brain. I wasn't illiterate, by any means, but my intelligence was not the same as Fishlegs's. While he was bursting with factual knowledge, even beyond the realm of dragons, I had a different kind of intelligence based more around observation, calculation and test. Together, though, our intellects would be rather formidable against the Red Death.

"Well, at least we know what it is now. Every little bit helps, right?" I tried to sound nervous, even though I didn't really feel very nervous anymore. I was about to try and continue the conversation with Fishlegs when I heard a voice echo through the walls of the kill ring.

"_Ah, that 'Hiccup' Viking is here. Gronckle, remember, go easy on him, but make it look genuine."_ It sounded like the voice of the Nadder. I bet Astrid would be happy to know that her chosen dragon was looking out for my safety and apparently dictating what to do to the other dragons.

"_Well obviously. Wasn't that the whole point of his meeting with us? We're not supposed to seriously hurt any of the trainees this time around and we have to let Hiccup win. Speaking of which, do you think he can hear us?"_ The Gronckle stated out loud. With my mind focused only on their conversation, I responded.

"Yes." I hoped no one near me would wonder why I answered my own question and would just attribute it to the fact that I was the 'weird' one on the island. I also hoped the dragons could hear me.

"_Well, it looks like he can indeed hear us, assuming he was answering you, Gronckle."_ I heard the Nadder's chirp echo through the walls of its container. "_Just follow the Gronckle's lead,

Hiccup. Since only you can understand us, she'll be helping you through this training exercise we decided on after you left that night. Just pay attention and trust us a little. We'll try to do the same."_ And with that, the ring went quiet. Which was good for me, because it pulled the attention of the group to the arena in front of us.

"Well, that's... Odd. First they were louder than I'd ever heard them. Now they're dead silent. This kind of behavior hasn't been noted anywhere in the Dragon Manual. Maybe we'll have to update it...?" Fishlegs seemed almost more excited about updating the manual than he did actually fighting the dragons. I reminded myself that it was probably because Fishlegs wasn't much of a fighter when Astrid caught my eye. She was looking at me inquisitively, not unlike how the rest of them were looking at me earlier, but she had a smile on her face.

"Mornin' lads! An' lassies," Gobber corrected himself as he walked up to us, lagging just slightly behind and to the right of my father. They both looked at me, and then to the rest of the students. "Right. No sense sittin' 'round out here. Welcome ta' dragon training!" Gobber shouted, pulling open the first gate to the arena. Walking into the small tunnel that would lead us to the killing floor, my father threw open the second gate. I swallowed hard and waited in the back for the other teens to follow first. Astrid, to my relief, was doing the same. Getting a tiny moment of privacy, I whispered to her.

"Apparently the dragon has a plan, and all I have to do is follow it. Makes it simple." With that, Astrid merely smiled and nodded, taking her place next to me and the other students. We were standing shoulder to shoulder and watching Gobber and my father. Gobber was giving each dragon an introduction and Fishlegs was butting in with statistics from the Dragon Manual. I was too busy laughing internally at the small chirps the Terror was giving off to pay any more attention.

"_Oh, they're here! Do I get more fish? Maybe give me a fish aft-OH! Hey, there's a mouse! Get back here, time for lunch-"_

"Hiccup." My father clearly stating my name pulled me from listening to the Terror. "Are you ready for this?" He looked me over. "And what are you smiling about? I didn't think you'd be excited about this like the others are." I looked at my peers, noticing that they all appeared excited and ready, with exception to Astrid. She didn't seem very happy about this situation at all, but I had a feeling that it was more to do with me than the dragons.

"Oh, I'm not... Excited, about this, really. I mean, at all. I'm just, uh, trying to prepare myself, you know, for what- what's ahead, and that means... Not, not letting my nerves get the best of me?" Why did I phrase that statement as a question? I swear, I can handle taming a dragon, but talking to my father? Impossible.

"Well, alright, Hiccup. We'll get started, then. Gobber, open her up." I was surprised by this, even if I no longer feared the dragons. We're starting so soon? I figured we'd be spending most of the morning listening to the two of them explain the small details and finesse required to attack and defend. Apparently, that wasn't the way they had planned this. Snotlout was the only one of us that spoke

up.

"Wait! Aren't you gonna teach us first?" He almost looked worried. I smiled a little again.

"We believe in learning on tha' job." Gobber stared Snotlout down, his stone tooth protruding from his lips. With a slight grin, he pushed the lever down, unlocking the Gronckle's cage. The doors blew open, and out she flew, her fly-like wings beating hurriedly against the wind. She growled, and while the rest of the trainees scrambled to pick up shields to defend themselves, I stared at the Gronckle, waiting for her to give me an order.

"_So this is what the Dragon Viking looks like? The Nadder was right, your scent is deceiving. You're small, but extra weight won't help you on the back of a Night Fury..." _She fluttered over to me, growling. "_Alright, time to stop acting surprised and start running! I'll handle the rest."_ She fired a blast at me just as I started moving. It was a methodical strike, detonating next to where I was standing, so even if I hadn't moved it would've only warmed me up, not ignited me. Relieved that I had actual evidence that the dragons would willingly work with me, I tried paying a little attention to what my father and Gobber were saying. It's not every day the Chief of the village and his closest confidant gives you private lessons, so giving them an ear probably wasn't a bad idea.

"HICCUP! Pay attention and grab a shield!" I heard Gobber shout to me. Nodding, I headed to a few shields sitting on the ground near where my father was yelling something at the twins as they fought over a single shield. Seeing an open target, the Gronckle fired, splintering the item in their grasp. Shuffling out from between the twins and the arena's exit, I grabbed a red one for myself and hurried off, not really running that fast. I didn't see a need to waste my energy when the Gronckle wasn't paying me any attention.

"Alright, you two! Yer out!" My father stomped over to the twins and yanked them to their feet, directing them to the half-open gate of the arena. They went and slid out underneath it. "A shield is your most important asset. More important than any weapon. If you have to choose between a hammer," He gestured to the weapon in his own hands, "or a shield, take the shield." I was considering mentioning to both my father and Gobber that neither of them were using shields when I heard Gobber speak up.

"Right! An' your shield's good fer more than jus' defendin' yerselves. Use 'em to make noise, and lots of it! Throws off a dragon's aim." In tune, we all started knocking our weapons against our shields(I had picked up an axe from the weapon rack to blend in a little more) while the Gronckle hovered above us. She shook her head a few times in confusion before flying at Snotlout, scattering us. "It doesn' last forever, though, so use it ta get outta the way when ya need to!" I heard Gobber chuckle a little at the vulgar name Snotlout had uttered at him when my father spoke up again.

"Gobber's right about that. You have to live and breathe this stuff! Know your enemy! Now, dragons all have a limited number of shots. How many does a Gronckle have?"

"SIX!" Fishlegs chimed in immediately, cutting off Snotlout's most

likely incorrect answer with his own. He could probably recite the entire manual entry on Gronckles by heart, if instructed to. And I knew he would, if anyone would listen.

"Correct! That's one for each of you!" I heard Gobber continue. Fishlegs started celebrating at his little victory, paying nearly no attention to the Gronckle flying around the arena. One well aimed blast later, his shield shattered on his hand.

"Fishlegs, out!" Gobber pointed to the door of the arena. Half running and half sulking, Fishlegs squeezed himself under the gate. I turned to see Snotlout casually talking to Astrid, who was currently focused on the Gronckle, paying no attention to Snotlout or his comments. He was, predictably, flirting with her, despite being in the middle of our first dragon training session. He kept it up until his shield was blown out of his hands, crumpling on the wall near him. Without more instruction than his name, Snotlout stalked off to the gate of the kill ring.

"So, just you and me then, huh?" I asked Astrid, walking up behind her. She grinned, aiming her eyes at mine.

"Nope. Just you." Astrid must've seen the same thing I did: the Gronckle was pretty much ignoring me, save for that first shot. There were only two shots left, and even though Astrid had always been the more physically capable of the two of us, we both knew only one of those shots was going to miss.

"_Incoming!_" The Gronckle seemed to be enjoying this whole thing, especially since Astrid and I were the only two left. As she flew towards us, Astrid dove out of the way. I, however, decided to drop to the ground, letting the dragon hover over me. I dropped my axe and shield when I hit the floor of the ring, pushing myself back to my feet just as the Gronckle fired at Astrid, successfully blowing most of her shield off of its handle. Astrid ran to the door and slid under it, quickly spinning around to watch me from behind the gate with the rest of the teens. She didn't even realize Snotlout was trying to talk to her. She also hadn't noticed the look of utter shock on everyone else's faces, them having realized that unless I died, I'd come out on top of our first training session.

"HICCUP!" I heard both my father and Gobber bellow. I spun immediately toward where the sound of beating wings was coming from, seeing the Gronckle flying at me yet again. I reacted as quick as I could, jumping out of the way and landing hard on the ground. Paying no attention to the throbbing sensation coming from my left knee after its contact with the stone floor, I hopped back up and really started running. I watched her get closer to me when I realized we were about to hit the wall of the ring. I dropped to the ground again as the Gronckle tackled the wall above me. She shook her head a little and dropped to her feet, sucking in air, her mouth not an arm's length from my head. Reacting to this slow intake of breath, I fell to my back and pushed off the wall, sliding myself between dragon and stone for a moment before coming out from behind her. I jumped to a standing position just as she fired her last shot at the wall I had been in front of not seconds prior. She turned to me, growling, an angry look on her face. However, her voice was anything but.

"_Very good! I wasn't planning on firing until you were out of the

way, but I don't think they noticed. I'm sure they'll be putting me back, now that I'm out of fire-hrk!"_ I heard the Gronckle yelp in pain as Gobber's hook dug into the flesh just under her teeth.

"And that's six! Go back ta' bed, ya overgrown sausage!" He pulled the Gronckle to the door my father had just opened. With some work, the two of them put the Gronckle back. I heard her growl a little from behind the door.

"_That went well, minus the hook in my jaw. Ugh. Anyway, Hiccup, you'll probably be working with the Terror tomorrow, but considering she hasn't stopped chattering about you since our first meeting I don't think you'll have much of a problem with her."_ Her cage went quiet again. With the Terror in mind, I started thinking back to Toothless playing with the light glinting off of my work hammer a few weeks ago. I'd originally planned on using that to lead the Terror back to its cage, but now that I understood Dragonese I could probably just tell it what to do, using a few fish as bartering tools.

"Well, tha' was... Unexpected..." I heard Gobber state, shock in his voice. "Hiccup, since when have you been fast, lad?" I laughed nervously, trying to figure out how to avoid the attention I never realized I'd be getting if I started to win in the ring.

"Well, you know, I've, well, been your apprentice for most of my, uh, my life, and I've, uh, spent a lot of time, by myself, in the woods... I guess, uh, wandering the island has helped me speed up. A little. Not much." Gobber looked at me with uncertainty painted all over his face. Before he could respond, though, Fishlegs interrupted.

"A little? Hiccup, I've only seen Astrid move like that!" I looked over to the other teens and noticed that other than Snotlout, they all looked genuinely impressed. My father and even Astrid, to an extent, looked proud of me.

"Well, if ya plan on interrogating my son, why not do it over lunch? It might not be noon yet, but I'm certainly hungry enough for it. Gobber, take the rest of the trainees to the Meade Hall for something to eat. Hiccup and I will be just behind you. I'd like to have a word with him in private." He was honestly beaming at me. I don't think he's ever been proud of something I did, but yet, here he was. What made it feel so bad was that I was basically lying to him, but it was necessary. I kept reminding myself of this as the rest of them walked away.

"Hiccup, where _did_ you learn how to move like that? And how long has it been like this, anyway?" He looked at me, then raised an eyebrow. "I assume it's how you caught that knife." He looked down at my right hand. It was scarred, but healing, and completely scabbed over. Only my thumb was still bandaged, as it took the brunt of the force behind the knife Snotlout threw at me. I scratched the back of my head and repeated what I'd said before.

"It's like I said, dad. I've spent a lot of time in the forests on this island, and it's been really helpful. I've also done a bit of swimming in the ocean, and the water helps people of, uh, 'my' stature speed themselves up. Or so I've found. Plus, I am a blacksmith's apprentice, and if you aren't quick with your hands when

you're in that position you tend to regret it. Pretty quickly." I found myself unconsciously walking in tow with my father as he started his way to the gate of the arena. He laughed and smacked me on the back.

"Well, if you're too embarrassed to talk about it, I can understand. But don't let that girl run your whole life, Hiccup. You still gotta be your own man." I stumbled when he said this, as though his words had somehow managed to nearly trip me.

"DAD! Wait, you've got- that's not right- I mean, just- Gods, that's not correct! Astrid didn't have anything to do with this, and I mean it!" I managed to stop tripping, but I was still burning red with the idea my father was obviously getting at. He just shook his head and laughed.

"Alright, alright, I'll believe you. But I have to say, you almost remind me of the way I was when I first started seeing your mother..." My father was never one to talk about the past much, and even when he did recollect, it was usually to himself. This was something I was currently very appreciative of, since I'd need a few minutes of silence to calm myself down from what my father was implying about Astrid and I.

* * *

><p>"...Right. You have to be tough on yourselves." I heard Gobber's voice echoing from behind the doors of the Meade hall as my father and I approached. I pulled the door open and headed in after my father, grabbing a turkey leg and a glass of milk on my way to the table. Taking my seat across from Astrid, I took a bite out of my turkey when I noticed my father gesturing Gobber over to another table across the hall. They both stalked away, my father's comment of 'not fighting all of my battles for me' coming back to mind. The second they were out of earshot, I heard Fishlegs speak up again.<p>

"Hey! Uh, Hiccup. Good job today." He was giving me a strange look. Glancing around the table, I realized that everyone was. It seemed more and more likely that not a single person believed my 'blacksmith wandering the forest' explanation. While Fishlegs was trying to figure out how to word what he wanted to say, Snotlout butted in.

"Look, we wanna know what's going on. We're supposed to work together now that our group's in Dragon Training, and you're holding out on us? If what you're doing is so good at making you a decent fighter for once, imagine what it could do for someone like me!" I ignored the expected insult and thought about what Snotlout had just said. I didn't like the sound of being called a 'decent fighter' when I hadn't actually done any fighting in the ring. I cleared my throat.

"Well, Snotlout, it's not like anyone in 'our' group has ever bothered reaching out to me until very recently." I silently hoped Astrid would get that I wasn't grouping her with the others as I gathered my thoughts and continued. "So, you can't exactly blame me for 'holding out on you' when the main reason I spent all of my time hiding either in the forge or the forest to begin with was to avoid getting locked in a shed or pelted with rocks. Or dragged through a

field. Or tied to a tree. Or shoved into the ocean when it's freezing outside. Do you need me to keep going?" I gave him a blunt look of sarcasm that turned to surprise when he just stared at me. Deciding to take advantage of this unusual silence I kept speaking, since I still had a point to make. "Besides, what I've been doing _hasn't_ made me a better fighter. All its improved is my speed, and it's not exactly the easiest thing to 'teach' to someone." I took a breath. "And like I said, we wouldn't have any time for me to help you speed up when we'll be spending all it training dragons." I breathed out, hoping they'd finally let it rest, when Fishlegs raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth.

"Training dragons? Almost sounds like you're trying to teach it a trick, or something. Like it's a pet." The group sniggered at the idea while I silently tried to keep myself from going pale. Finally looking to Astrid, I noticed she wasn't looking very comfortable in this situation, either. I spoke up, trying my hardest to keep myself from stammering again.

"Yeah, that's a funny... Slip-up, there. I meant training ****with**** dragons. Not training them. Like you could really train a dragon." I tried to laugh, but stopped when I realized I wasn't making any sounds. "Yeah, like that'd work. Just show up in the kill ring with a fish and hope the Nadder won't rip you limb from limb when you open its cage. 'Do a flip and you get a fish!' Sign me up." I managed to pull off a joke with my normal sarcastic banter, but I still felt faint. Luckily, no one noticed it, as everyone but Astrid and I were laughing lightly at my joke.

"Well, uh, Hiccup, we're... Well, sorry, for doing all... That. To you. And I'm not just saying that because I want you to tell us how you've gotten so much faster." Did Fishlegs really just apologize to me? In front of everyone? My surprise was extended by the twins uttering in agreement and Snotlout merely looking away, though clearly not comfortable with the subject. I considered it for a moment, and then realized this was probably the best way to get to Fishlegs even if I hadn't completely forgotten his complacency with the others tormenting me for the last seven years.

"Well, Fishlegs, thanks for the apology. It's... Nice of you. Really." I felt horribly strange saying that, knowing it was only partially true. "And everyone else who agreed with him." I tried to make that statement as general as possible so I didn't leave anyone out. Snotlout didn't exactly apologize, after all, but I don't want to get on his bad side because it would just make getting him to understand the truth about our supposed enemies that much more difficult. "Anyway, I'm just gonna finish lunch and go take a nap. Running from that Gronckle really tired me out." I took a big bite out of my lukewarm turkey leg, hoping to finish eating in silence. Then I heard Fishlegs address me again.

"So, Hiccup, after that nap you plan on taking, do you maybe want to help me update the Dragon Manual?" There seemed to be a hopeful quality in his voice. Before he could try and withdraw his offer(He was often as timid as I was) I swallowed hard and jumped at it.

"Well, alright. We can meet near my house at sundown." I quickly ripped more flesh off of the leg, hoping no one had overheard or would want in on our plans. Not that I expected anyone to actually

want to hear Fishlegs talking about the manual to begin with, but I needed to do this individually, since I knew easing just one person into the idea that dragons aren't pure evil would be daunting. I wondered if I could even approach Fishlegs with the concept by myself. A voice addressing the agreement between the two of us made me remember I wasn't alone.

"Hey, you two, would you mind if I came with?" Fishlegs looked at Astrid in confusion. The rest of the table wasn't paying us any attention, since the twins had decided to get into another fight. They were currently wrestling, Ruffnut having knocked Tuffnut's helmet across the room while pinning him to the floor. Snotlout was laughing and cheering Tuffnut on, even though he was losing.

"Uh, are you sure, Astrid? You never struck me as the kind of person to care much about the manual..." Fishlegs trailed off with his thought as Astrid responded.

"I've read it a few times, but never all in one sitting. But it'd probably be good for my training if I see what the two of you put into this manual update." I looked between the two of them, hoping for my sake that Fishlegs would agree to letting Astrid come with us.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't be a problem." He looked over to the twins, flinching a little as Tuffnut whipped his head back, hitting his sister in the face. In retaliation, she slammed his head down against the dirty stone floor.

"Yeah, just as long as neither of us starts acting like that," I said, pointing my thumb at the twins and Snotlout, who had apparently decided to join the fray. He was currently being pinned by both Ruff and Tuff.

"Please. I don't want anyone damaging the manual. It'd just be more work to fix it." He looked back to his near empty plate and stood up. "Well, Hiccup, I'm gonna grab some more. You want anything?" I considered it, but then shook my head. I wasn't planning on eating anything else in the Meade Hall.

"No, no thanks. I'm good. One turkey leg is good enough for me." Fishlegs nodded and walked off as I thought about heading to the Cove. I wasn't actually planning on taking a nap, and I was still hungry. But I wanted to finish lunch with Toothless, and probably Astrid, if she decided to follow me again. Finishing off the turkey leg, I went to drink the rest of my milk as Astrid started talking to me.

"That was way too close for me. Nice save, though." She adjusted one of her shoulder pads nervously. "Did you really think the Nadder might have actually hurt us?" I shook my head.

"No. I knew she wouldn't just because of how she sounded," I whispered, making sure no one was paying attention. "She's not dangerous. If you know what you're doing, no dragon is dangerous. At least, no dragon I've ever heard of." Astrid glared at me, and I knew why. "Look, the Red Death doesn't count as a dragon. It's pure evil." She slowly nodded as I finished my milk and stood up. Astrid stood as well, making to leave with me as Fishlegs walked back up to the table, a full plate in his hand.

"Enjoy your nap, Hiccup. And while we're working on the manual, maybe we could talk about what a Night Fury's stats might be? I always thought it was an interesting topic to talk about, but no one else seems to." I grinned at this. I had no problem talking about Night Furies with Fishlegs.

"Well, I don't see why not. But we can talk more about it tonight; I really should get going. Enjoy your lunch, and I'll talk to you later." I turned to leave when I heard Astrid say something about going to the forest to improve her axe-throwing. Pulling the door open, I slipped out and waited for her. After a few seconds, she emerged from the hall, punching me on the arm playfully. Smiling still, I rubbed where she hit me and shook my head as we made for the forest.

"Well, today sure has been eventful. Especially for you, considering how many lucky breaks the Gods have thrown at you today. First the dragons agree to help you, then no one really questions how you managed to beat us all at training because they were too embarrassed about treating you like dirt. Now we've got an easy way to get Fishlegs on our side, and it's only noon." She grinned. "What's next, your dad finding out about Toothless and being okay with it?" I shared a laugh with her as we entered the border of trees, disappearing into the brush.

* * *

><p>No matter how many times it happens, I will never get bored of riding on Toothless. Especially with Astrid behind me, reading my journal over my shoulder as I write in it. We've been drifting through clouds for a few minutes now, enjoying the late afternoon sun breaking through them. We'd probably have to land soon, considering we have to get to the front of my house to meet up with Fishlegs.<p>

"Speaking of which... Toothless, I may be introducing you to another person in a few days, is that alright? He's not nearly as Viking-like as the other three in our group, so he should be easy to convince of my point. You'd probably like him, to be honest. He's a bit obsessed with the dragon manual I told you about, though. He's always been bookish. But unlike me, he has a natural ability to defend himself, if only because of his size." I'd been talking with Astrid about this point, and we both agreed that the main reason he wasn't ostracized like I was came down to his huge weight advantage. Sure, he was a better fighter than I was, but not by much.

"_Thank you for telling me. But you don't need to convince me that meeting the other Viking trainees is a good idea every time you plan on doing it. Just tell me when and what the plan is. We can handle the rest as it comes."_ I rubbed Toothless's head.

"Alright, bud, thanks. I'll keep that in mind." I turned my head slightly so I could glance at Astrid, her head still resting on my shoulders. "So, do you wanna try a freefall yet?" I smirked, deciding to write my next thought down for her to read:

...I expected the same dry 'no' she gave me when I asked her this question right as we took off a few hours ago from the cove.

"Oh, come on. It wasn't that dry." She laughed after I finished writing. I wasn't planning on this, but she has been interested in my journals for a while now. I figured it probably wouldn't be a problem if she was present while I recorded what was going on during the moments we spent together, so I've been letting her read as I write.

"It was dry enough. Not like it matters, anyway. I just wanted to see how you'd react; I wasn't serious." I heard her sigh as she pulled an arm from my waist and hit me on the arm like she always does.

"Oh? And what was that for?" I asked, rubbing my arm without much thought.

"For trying to annoy me for your amusement." She hugged me from behind.

"At least you're not mad. It'd be kinda hard to get away from me up here."

"Oh, shut up and let me enjoy the view for a little while longer before we have to land." I nodded silently, reaching out my hand to put my journal away when a stiff breeze loosened some pages of it, causing them to start flapping around. I managed to stop it right on the last page I wanted to see. My newest (and best) drawing of Astrid and I riding Toothless was sitting on the two pages in front of me. Before I could shut the journal, though, I heard an intake of breath from my left and a felt Astrid's arms tighten around me.

"Uh, Astrid, this isn't, well, it's- It's not-" She cut off my stuttering.

"Hiccup, it's okay. Really. It's... Beautiful. I didn't know you could draw this well. You're almost as good as Bucket is, and you don't have a cracked skull to thank for it. It's all just your natural talent, and another thing about you I never knew. Another thing about you I like." Astrid completely removed any trace of worry I might have felt for this accidental reveal with those words. A funny thought popped into my head as I considered her eyes still scanning my work. I had to mention it to her, even if it'd take me a while to follow through with it.

"I've got a bunch of drawings. And this one," I pointed to the pages of the journal tacked to Toothless's saddle, "appears more than once, in varying poses. But this version is the best one I've drawn so far. I'll have to show you the others some day, if you'd like."

"Of course." I shut the journal and finally replaced it in my harness.

"Anyway, we probably should get going back to the cove. Sundown's coming, and we don't want to be leave Fishlegs waiting. Toothless, let's head back." I felt him purr beneath me in response.

"_Okay, but tell your mate to hold on._" I sighed and rolled my eyes, but did as he asked.

"Astrid, Toothless wants you to hold on tight. He also wants me to sneak an eel into his next basket of fish for a comment I won't be repeating." Toothless smacked me lightly with an ear flap just before

flipping upside down and speeding off. Astrid was apparently trying her best to crush my ribcage with her arms and legs once she realized the ground was above us, but luckily she didn't scream. After a few minutes of flying mainly upside down at extremely high speeds, we came to a halt in the cove. We climbed off, and Astrid immediately turned to me, breathing a little heavily.

"So, we can do that again tomorrow, right?" I was not expecting to hear that come out of her mouth.

"Really, Astrid? I mean, yeah, we can try another inverted flight again tomorrow, if we have the time."

"Can we try a freefall, too?" I turned my head to get a better look at her.

"Look at you. One controlled, but still terrifying flight later, and you're hooked. You're even looking to try something that mortified you yesterday. You know, you should be thanking me for giving you an unfair advantage when our Taming classes begin." Putting away Toothless's riding gear with my own and throwing on my bearskin vest, I turned back to the two of them. Astrid was cradling his head and scratching him behind the ear, his large back paw repeatedly slamming against the ground in response. "Well, this explains why he started purring so loudly. Toothless, as much as I hate to interrupt you getting a nice scratch, Astrid and I do need to get going." He looked at me, continuing his very loud purr. Slowly pulling away from Astrid, he turned and bumped his head into my stomach before turning and heading into our den. He stuck his tail out and waved us goodbye.

* * *

><p>The two of us had reached the border of the dense wood just near my house when we both noticed Fishlegs. He was standing with his back to us, apparently looking out over the Island of Berk. I was planning on sneaking into my house through the rear when he heard us and turned around.<p>

"Hey Hiccup, Astrid. Um, what were you doing in the woods? I thought you were taking a nap." I didn't want Fishlegs to think I was lying to him intentionally, so I addressed this before he could continue.

"Oh, yeah. I was sleeping in this place I have in the woods. It's a small safe house hidden out there, just in case I can't get back home for whatever reason. I slept there so no one would bother me. Then, uh, I ran into Astrid and we both walked back together." Fishlegs looked between the both of us and shrugged, to my relief.

"I guess that makes sense. Anyway, let's go to the Meade Hall. It's probably near empty by now, so finding a table shouldn't be a problem." He turned, leading us to the Meade Hall, the thick Dragon Manual under his arm. We walked there in silence, the only sounds around us being the faint ones coming from faraway villagers. There was also a slight rustle as I ran my hand through my hair for the hundredth time since landing, trying to make sure it wasn't still pulled back from riding on Toothless.

Entering the Meade Hall, we found it to be almost entirely empty.

There were a few Vikings sitting at a table near the towering double doors who paid us no attention when we walked in. Glancing around to make sure no one else was in the hall, I pointed out a table in the far corner that I was very used to sitting at. It was big enough to comfortably seat five, so it would do well for our purposes. Walking over and taking our seats, I looked around one more time to make sure no one was near us, just in case the conversation somehow moved on to training dragons. We sat there in silence for a few minutes while Fishlegs opened the manual and pulled a large stack of notes from between the cover and first page. Flipping over to a random entry, he started erasing small details and replacing them with new ones, mainly numbers. Before either Astrid or I could ask him what he was doing, he spoke up.

"I'm just updating some statistics on the dragons we've got locked in the kill ring; namely, a slight increase in the Gronckle's accuracy statistic. I've never had much of a chance to observe them when they raided us, so I never realized just how good they were at aiming." He scribbled down a few numbers. "The stats each dragon has in the manual were added in by me. I figured a number system would be an easy reference guide to dealing with dragons. It never occurred to me that most Vikings don't seem to understand numbers." He stopped scribbling and flipped over a page of his notes, read a little more, and started writing again. "But even if not many people pay attention to that sort of thing, I'm still recording it. I mean, it's still nice to have the reference, and I'm sure someone will eventually notice how much easier it is to deal with dragons when you know all of their little details, instead of just running in and swinging." Turning the page, he continued writing, but was apparently done speaking. So I figured I might.

"Yeah, I'm sure eventually someone will. After all, Vikings are stubborn, not stupid. But if anyone ever notices how much easier dealing with dragon raids is when you know the dragons, uh, statistics, then I'm sure it'll catch on like dragon fire." I rubbed the back of my head. It still kinda hurt from Snotlout's punch. "Wait, did you say you're the one who recorded all of those stats?" That was a lot of work to be done all by one person, especially someone as young as us.

"Yeah. I spend a lot of time with the manual, because I'm... Not the best fighter on the Island. But I am good with numbers." He quickly looked to Astrid and I, and then went back to the manual. She said something before I had the chance to.

"Fishlegs, just because you're not a good fighter doesn't mean you have to bury yourself in a book. Look at Hiccup. He can't fight, but he's quick. You just have to find your niche on the battlefield." He looked up from the manual again, his eyes turned to Astrid.

"Astrid, I appreciate it, but I've been trying to use my hammer for years. I'm still terrible with it..." I had a feeling he was starting to close himself off at that admission. Fishlegs never liked talking about his fighting ability, and I'm sure he wasn't feeling very good about himself after openly admitting he's a poor fighter in a warrior village. I had to bring him back if we were ever going to get to talking to him about the dragons.

"Fishlegs, Astrid may be on to something. I never really bothered learning how to fight, but the few times I tried picking up a weapon,

they were always too heavy for me. I never even considered using anything else, because I never thought I could do it. But considering how fast I've gotten, if I use a fast weapon more fitting to my size, I won't have a problem with it." Fishlegs looked back up from the manual again.

"A fast weapon? What, like a dagger, or something?" He gave me an inquisitive look, which wasn't uncommon from Fishlegs.

"No. A dagger's too small to be used as a reliable weapon when you're fighting. I'm going to have to make a sword for myself that's as long as it can be without being too heavy for me. I have a decent idea of how to do it, but I won't really have the time until after dragon training." My mind wandered from my sword to an idea that had just appeared in my head. "Fishlegs, You'd probably be better off with a much larger weapon." He almost looked offended when I said this.

"Wait, why a big weapon? Because I'm a bigger... Viking?" I didn't want him to think I was picking on him, especially considering how hypocritical of me it would be.

"Yes and no. Not because you're heavier than the rest of us, but because you need to play to your strengths. You may be too slow to take my route, but your arms are about as big around as Tuffnut's chest. You have a lot of power behind you, so giving you a large, overreaching weapon makes sense, because it makes up for your lack of speed. In fact, I have some ideas..." I let my voice trail off intentionally, letting him say something if he wanted.

"Play to my strengths? Ideas? What... What kind of ideas?" I must've grabbed his attention with that one.

"Weapon ideas. If I made you a war hammer that had a huge head and a long, steel handle, you'd have a weapon much more suited for you. It would probably feel more gratifying than swinging that tiny hammer around all the time, too. Because it would fit you." Finally, I saw Fishlegs crack a small smile at this.

"I guess my hammer is a little small for me. I mean, when I use the thing, I can barely feel it..." He went silent again.

"Yeah, and I can barely lift it. Which is why I'm better off with a short sword. It's like you said to me a few days ago. I may have 'plus five speed,' but I'm also down in points on strength." I almost laughed at the idea of assigning numbers to skills and weaknesses. Only Fishlegs would do something like that.

"Wait, why did I never consider actually sitting down and doing that? Give everyone in our group their own statistics! That way, you can help them with their weapons, too!" I could see where Fishlegs was going with this, but I didn't think the others would really care too much about it. I was about to mention this to Fishlegs when Astrid decided to step in.

"It's not a bad idea, but you need to be less involved with explaining it, because Snotlout and the twins aren't exactly as smart as you are. Instead of going into detail, just tell them it'll help with their future weapons, since Hiccup here already makes all of ours personally." I wasn't really looking to tell that to Fishlegs,

but I didn't mind Astrid saying it. I just nodded my head.

"Yeah... I wasn't going to say anything about it, but whenever we're given orders to make weapons for all of you, I volunteer myself to spend some time getting the details down right. Just my own way of helping protect the group, since I can't help you guys any other way." I watched as Fishlegs went from looking surprised to rather hurt.

"Really? Even though we turned our backs on you?" I nodded.

"Yep. Like how even though most of the people in our village treat me like a pest, they'd still defend me from a dragon because they know I can't do it myself. We're Vikings. We care for our own." I looked to his notes, and then back to him. "Look, don't worry about it. What's past is past. Besides, don't we have a manual to update?" Fishlegs seemed to go back to normal when I mentioned the manual again. He flipped a few more pages and came to one that was mostly blank.

"The Night Fury. Speed, size, shot limit, wingspan, weight and everything else. All unknown. No one's ever seen one." He shuffled through his notes, coming to a page with some drawings. Not as good as the ones I've done, but still decent. "I tried sketching out what I think it might look like. Do you ever wonder that?" In truth, I always did wonder what a Night Fury looked like. And now that I was the Bond-Brother of one, I knew that Fishlegs's drawing was rather incorrect. He was right on the color, but he was wrong on pretty much everything else. The sketches looked a bit like a pitch black Nadder with the spikes on its head removed, standing at about the height of a Nightmare.

"I've wondered that since I was old enough to think about dragons. And I've also got some ideas of what one... Might look like." I tried to ignore the little slip up as I pulled out my journal and opened the front cover, pulling out a few carefully chosen old watercolor paintings I made of Toothless and handing them off to Fishlegs. His eyes went wide at them, slowly scanning over all of the brush strokes.

"Wow, I didn't know you could paint. This is a lot more detailed than the one I made, too. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you're close to the real thing. Would you mind if I kept one of these and sketched it into the manual? It might be useful as a possible identifier in the future." I considered it for a moment. It's not like anyone knowing what Toothless looks like would be a problem, since they'd still know he's a dragon even without the manual.

"You can use one, but only one. No point in putting a lot of time into it when we're not even sure if this is what it looks like." He kept shuffling through them, almost as though he was looking for a specific painting.

"Hiccup, in all of these paintings... The dragon looks rather unimposing. Its eyes even look like giant cat eyes. Don't you have any that make it seem more... Ferocious?" I hadn't even considered this, since I rarely ever pictured Toothless as ferocious-looking. I've also never even sketched him in such a way, and I wasn't sure if I could.

"No, those are the best ones. I wanted them to look more... Natural.

I mean, dragons can't always be horrible killing machines. Even the best Vikings in history aren't always fighting, and I wanted to try and... Paint a dragon that way." I really hoped he wouldn't find that point weird, since it could hurt the small amount of progress I've made.

"Huh. I never thought of that before. It's hard to think of a dragon doing anything but fighting, though, so that's probably why." He handed back the rest of the paintings, having chosen the only one that also has myself painted alongside Toothless. It was a simple painting of Toothless sitting next to me as I looked off to the right of the page. I had a feeling Fishlegs chose it because it gave a reference to how big the Night Fury was.

"Well, we have a decent enough picture for the book, but still no stats. Any ideas?" I shook my head, since I didn't know how his 'stats' even worked. "Hm. Well, maybe if I explain how the numbers work you can give me a hand?" Begrudgingly, I nodded. I really didn't want to hear all of this, but it would help with getting Fishlegs on our side. I still wasn't sure how I'd bring up what dragons were actually like. "Alright! This isn't too difficult to understand, anyway. You'll probably get it in a few minutes." He flipped through the manual to an explanation page that detailed how 'Dragon Statistics' worked. "Let's begin."

* * *

><p>An hour later, Fishlegs and I had just finished explaining the system to Astrid. I grasped his ideas pretty quickly, and Astrid did too, once I explained them to her. Fishlegs's heart was in the right place, but he never was very good at explaining how his brain worked to the others. The system itself was pretty basic: based off of previous recordings of how dragons compared to Vikings in ability, he created a number system. It was simple, but pretty effective, and far more intuitive during battle than a long-winded explanation. The higher the number, the better the dragon was in that category. Categories that Vikings didn't have were based on how much damage it could cause, bodily or otherwise.<p>

"So, now that you know how it works, what would you say the Night Fury's stats are? My guess is it's probably close to a Nadder, but a lot faster. Plus fifteen speed, at least." I had a very hard time suppressing the grin coming to my face, and tried to get rid of it by speaking.

"Oh, I'd say it's probably closer to plus thirty in speed. Maybe plus four in size, a shot limit of fourteen and plus six to fire heat. The wingspan and other details I guessed are on the painting." Now that I knew how this system worked, I could immediately tell where the deficiencies were. And I still wasn't sure how fast Toothless really could go, because whenever we tried to reach his top speed, the wind would nearly rip me from his back. The new harness would let me lie closer to him, though, so I might soon find out.

"Hiccup... Plus ****thirty****? Really? I don't think anything can fly that fast. Not even a Night Fury." I had a feeling he wouldn't buy it, but I knew it was true.

"I'm only basing that off of the fact that every time I've tried shooting the thing down, I miss by miles. I can't react fast enough."

I was rarely good at bluffing, but this I knew I could do. Fishlegs shrugged.

"What about the rating of six for fire heat? The Nadder's is plus nine. You don't think a Night Fury's fire is stronger?" I shook my head, but Astrid answered for me. It was 'her' dragon we were talking about, after all.

"Why should he? We don't know of any dragon that even comes close to a Nadder's firepower. The next one in line is the Nightmare, and that's only plus four, according to your numbers. Not to mention, if the Night Fury has that many shots, it won't need them to be really hot." Fishlegs nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, I guess you have a point. But between us, I still prefer the Gronckle, even if it isn't as mysterious as the legendary offspring of lightning and death itself." He went back to updating some more pages, a process I noticed he didn't seem to have stopped since we entered the hall.

"You like the Gronckle?" Astrid feigned surprise, since we'd both talked about this before. Fishlegs seemed to sink into his seat just a bit, almost embarrassed about admitting he liked the way a dragon looked. "Well, if it's anything to you, if I could keep a dragon as a pet, I'd take the Nadder." He popped back up in surprise.

"Really? I always thought you hated everything about dragons. What do you like about the Nadder?" Astrid smiled.

"It's light on its feet, deadly in battle and does everything it can to keep itself in top form. Even if they do raid us for food, you have to admire their ability." Fishlegs nodded in understanding and then turned to me.

"Hiccup, what about you? I assume it's the Night Fury, based on your pictures." I looked back at the paintings, still sitting on top of my journal. I grinned a little at the sight of Toothless before speaking.

"You'd be right about that. I feel like the Night Fury and I are rather similar. He never seems to attack with the other dragons; he just shows up alone sometimes during raids, does a lot of damage and flies off without taking a thing. Like he's an outcast among dragons." Due to the Red Death, this was basically true. His species hadn't been allowed anywhere near the nest since the Tyrant took over.

"Don't be so dramatic, Hiccup. You're not an Outcast, and you're not alone if you have at least one friend. And now you have two, so quit it." Astrid punched me lightly on the arm after she finished telling me this. I just shook my head and rubbed where she'd hit, like I always do.

"She's got a point, Hiccup. If I can't beat myself up about how I've treated you for the last seven years, then you can't mope about it, either. It's the past, right?" His now cheerful demeanor made me wonder if this evening had been even more effective than I'd originally thought. It gave me an idea.

"Fishlegs, can I ask you a question?" He looked back up at me and

nodded.

"Sure, Hiccup. What is it?" He responded simply.

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like if dragons didn't raid us like they do? What would Berk even be like if we didn't have to constantly worry about getting attacked in the middle of the night?" I was waiting for his response, but with how long he was taking, Astrid decided to speak up again.

"I know I have, a few times. Honestly, I think I'd prefer it that way. As much as I like knowing how to defend my tribe from the dragons, It'd be better if we didn't have to. And who wouldn't want that? Most of the deaths in this village are because of them." I knew Astrid was trying to use this admission of hers to lead Fishlegs along, and hopefully keep him open to what I was saying. He never liked being the odd man out, so making sure he wasn't in this situation would help me get to my point.

"Well... Yeah, I have. Like Astrid said, who wouldn't want things to be like that? The only way it could get any better than the dragons leaving us alone is if we could domesticate them, like sheep or cattle. If we had dragons as 'pets,' like we were joking about earlier, we'd never have to worry about being raided by other tribes... Or Outcasts." The Gods really were smiling upon me, today especially. Though, I knew Fishlegs had always appreciated the creatures, and by no means could he be considered stupid. Harnessing their power would be a definite boost to our defenses and no one could deny it. But most Vikings probably wouldn't even consider it as an option. Then again, most Vikings weren't like me. And the Viking most like me was sitting at this table with Astrid and I.

"Hm. I hadn't considered that." I had to lie, but I'd already resigned myself to the fact that what I was doing was all one big lie. So a few smaller ones along the way couldn't hurt. "You're right, though. Imagine if we could keep dragons as pets. Even Alvin the Treacherous himself wouldn't stand a chance against us. We'd finally be free of both of our biggest problems by using one against the other." I waited for a response, all of my focus on the teenager in front of me.

"Yeah. Too bad it'll never happen, though..." Fishlegs yawned before continuing his thought. "It might be fun to think about what life would be like if dragons were our allies, but the truth is they are just ruthless killing machines, isn't it? Otherwise they wouldn't raid us all the time." It was getting pretty late, and I had a feeling Fishlegs would probably be heading to bed shortly. But I needed to plant a seed of doubt before I'd let that happen.

"Fishlegs... I've thought about that a lot, actually. And it doesn't make any sense." I waited in silence, hoping he would take the bait.

"What do you mean? They raid us to eat. What is there to make sense of?" I was about to continue when Astrid cut me off, again. I didn't have a problem with it, since I knew she was just trying to help. And get a word in, herself, since Fishlegs and I had done most of the talking.

"The dragons take everything they can get their claws on when they come, but at the same time the ones that we keep in the kill ring don't eat nearly that much. So Hiccup here seems to think they might be serving a dragon King, of sorts." Fishlegs' eyes widened slowly as Astrid spoke. Then he cut me off before I could talk.

"How... How did I never notice that?! You're right! What if there is a Dragon King, and they're being controlled, like... Bees, or something? If we kill the king, maybe they'll stop raiding us!" Just a little further with this train of thought, and then I'd let Fishlegs stew by himself on the concept.

"Well, we don't know for sure. But if that really is the case, and it's being fed all of our food, imagine how colossal the thing would have to be. It'd probably make a Nightmare seem like a Terror in comparison, otherwise it wouldn't need to eat nearly as much." The happy look on his face fell, immediately. But I already knew how to end the conversation and get Fishlegs thinking that maybe everything we thought we knew about these giant reptiles was wrong. "Meaning, the only way for us to beat something like that would be to use the dragons themselves." His look of sorrow transformed into one of confusion.

"Hiccup, the dragons in the kill ring are way too violent for that. Even the Terror attacks anyone that comes near it. How could we possibly use them as weapons against a huge dragon when we'd be too busy trying to keep them from killing us?" I let my mouth break into a grin before I continued.

"You can't repeat anything I'm about to say to anyone. Not that they'd believe you, anyway, but still, you can't repeat this. Ever. In fact, that probably applies to this entire evening." Fishlegs' eyes went wide again, but he remained silent, only nodding for me to continue. "Alright. The Terror in the kill ring isn't actually violent. None of them are. They're just terrified of being hurt every time their cage door opens. That's why they attack anyone they can see. The Terror, specifically, is actually really affectionate to anyone willing to give it a fish." I could see disbelief written all over his face, but instead of letting him speak his mind, I continued. "Look, I know it sounds crazy, but hear me out. Tomorrow, we're going to be up against the Terror. If the plan I've got works, It'll come out of its cage, see me and then run back in. And all I'll have to do is stand there." Fishlegs opened his mouth again.

"Hiccup, that's-"

"Fishlegs. Listen to me. It's getting late, and I have some... Things, to take care of before I go to bed tonight. But before I leave to do them, I need you to do something for me. Forget what I said about the Terror until tomorrow. After training, if things go they way I say they will, then we can continue from there. If not, then we can just pretend this entire conversation never happened. Alright?" This time I waited for a response. It came in the form of Fishlegs gathering his notes and carefully placing them in the Dragon Manual before closing the cover on them. He sighed heavily.

"Alright, Hiccup. I'll do that for you. It is the least I can do after... Well, you know. But for the record, I can't say I believe

you." He grabbed the book and stood up. "Not that I hate you, or anything. I just can't see you being right about this. Anyway... Hiccup, Astrid, It is getting late. I'll see you two tomorrow." He waved at us briefly before turning and heading to the door. After a few moments, he disappeared, leaving Astrid and I alone in the Meade Hall.

"So, would you consider that a victory? Because he seemed pretty unconvinced that what you just said is true."

"He might have seemed that way, but I have a feeling he won't be forgetting anything I just said any time soon. Even if I told him to. Once you get an idea about dragons into his head, he has a hard time getting it out. If he won't convince himself that I'm right, then tomorrow, I'll do it for him." Astrid gave me a puzzled look.

"Really? And how exactly are you going to pull that off?" I stood up when she said that, motioning to the door.

"Simple. Let's head down to the docks and grab a few small fish. I have a dragon to talk to." Standing, Astrid nodded in agreement as we started walking to the door of the hall.

"Also, Hiccup, nice job with that one. I never imagined you'd have enough confidence to go through with this so quickly." She seemed impressed with me again, but the truth was different than her explanation.

"The reason you never imagined I'd have the confidence is because I don't. I'm just telling myself I do, because if I don't this war will never end. It's... More important than me being comfortable."

"If you're going through with it, then you're confident enough. Now relax and let's get going to the docks." I pulled open the door to the hall and walked out, Astrid just behind me.

* * *

><p>I made my way to the kill ring alone, as Astrid and I had split up when I went to grab a few fish. I'd asked her to set up a distraction for me, since the sentry in front of the ring wouldn't leave otherwise. As I came to the ring itself, I noticed that no one was standing guard and the gate to the ring was open. Curious, I stepped down into the small hallway that connected the two gates, finding Astrid standing there, waiting for me.<p>

"Took you long enough. I grabbed a couple of my mother's herbs and made a small alteration to the guard's Tankard with them. He should be out for an hour or so, and the best part is, no one saw me do it, so he'll just think he fell asleep." We walked into the ring.

"_Oh, someone's here. AND THEY HAVE FISH?!"_ I couldn't make out the rest of the hurried chatter coming from the Terror's cage. Not wanting to waste any time, I got to the point.

"Terror, it's Hiccup. And yes, I do have fish for you, because I need you to do something for me. Tomorrow, we're supposed to be fighting you, but since I don't want you getting hurt, I'm here with a peace offering. If you run back into your cage tomorrow after you see me,

I'll give you this entire bucket with five fish in it." I waited for the telltale rumbling of a dragon's speech, but none came. "Terror? Did you he-"

"_Five? More than one? All I have to do is run back into my cage?"_ A few more seconds of silence passed. "_Give me the fish now and I'll run into my cage tomorrow._" Slightly relieved, I unlocked the feeding door to the dragon's cage and overturned the bucket of fish in front of it. Pushing the door open with one hand, I slid the fish in with the other. The door didn't even have time to shut before the sounds of a dragon gorging itself echoed from behind it.

"So we have a deal, then. Tomorrow, just run back into your cage, but only after you see me." An awful feeling hit me for rigging the training session, so I reminded myself yet again that it was for the greater good. "I need everyone thinking I won this one, too."

"_Don't worry about it, Hiccup. We'll make sure she doesn't forget. Now go to sleep._" The Nadder's tired sounding rumbles and chirps left the cage next to us, and with it came a feeling of reassurance.

"Thanks, Stormfly. I appreciate it. I'll talk to you later." I went to leave with Astrid when she spoke again.

"_Storm-Fly? What did you call me?_" She sounded more awake now, and thankfully not upset. I figured I might as well explain it, even though I didn't mean to use the name Astrid told me she'd chosen for the dragon.

"Hiccup, what did she say?" I had a feeling I knew where Astrid wanted to take this. I didn't mind it.

"She just asked me why I called her Stormfly. Why don't you explain it to her?" I notice Astrid's eyes widen a bit, but other than that, she seemed calm.

"Uh, N-Nadder? It's Astrid, the girl you met before. The name 'Stormfly' is the name that I, uh, chose. For you. If you decided to make me your rider." She slipped up a bit, but I couldn't blame her. A few seconds of relatively tense silence later, the Nadder responded.

"_Stormfly... I can't say I mind it. Let the girl know I'm fine with the name she chose for me, alright?_" She let out a loud yawn. "_Now please get going. I need to sleep._"

"I'll do that, Stormfly. And good night." The ring went silent again, save for the sound of the Terror chomping away at the fish I gave her. We left the arena, the bucket I brought the fish in now sitting next to the passed-out guard. We walked in relative silence to the village square when Astrid finally spoke up.

"So... What did she say?"

"She's fine with the name. And she's about as easy to read as you are, but you both seem set with the idea of being rider and dragon, so don't worry about it." Astrid sighed and punched me again. She followed up with a swift kiss on the cheek before bidding me a good

night. She ran up to her house and waved before slipping inside. I felt fairly exhausted myself, so I quickly dragged my body home, not even noticing the uphill trek. I opened the front door slowly, looking around to make sure my father was already asleep. Not seeing him, I entered, closing the door as quietly as I could. I slipped up the stairs and tossed off my boots and bearskin, crawling under the covers and closing my eyes.

12. The Inevitable Backfire

****A/N:****_ Happy Holidays! Unless you're reading this during a time period in which it isn't a holiday, in which case, 'hello.'_

_Blame the delay on the season. I've been busy. But after New Years I'll have a lot more time to spend on this, so we should get closer to my original update schedule, since I know many of you prefer it that way.

>

_With that out of the way, enjoy the new chapter, and happy Holiday/Christmas/Hanukkah/Kwanzaa/Smissmas/Snoggetog/Whatever.

>

* * *

><p>I woke up the next morning to the sound of a very large, meaty hand slamming against my door.<p>

"HICCUP! Time to get up and get to the ring!" A few distant thumps told me he was heading back downstairs. In a daze, I pulled myself from bed, threw on my usual clothes and exited the room. Normally, my father only wakes me up if I'm late for something. As I stumbled down the stairs, I found him waiting for me by the front door.

"No time to eat anything, Hiccup. Ya slept in a bit too long for that. Coulda missed training if I didn't wake ya up." He opened the door and walked out. Absentmindedly, I followed him out of the house, trying to rub the sleep from my eyes before we arrived at the ring. My mind was busy considering what I might say to Fishlegs after we finished with training this afternoon when my father's booming voice ripped through my thoughts.

"So, Hiccup. Why were you so late comin' home last night?" It took a few seconds for me to register what he'd said, but when I finally did I was no longer groggy. I couldn't exactly tell him the truth, so I just said the first thing that came to mind.

"I was just... Hanging out with Astrid, that's all." Right as the words left my mouth, I cringed a little. "You're not going to let me hear the end of this, are you?" He laughed before responding to me.

"Of course not, Hiccup. It's a father's job. Now, what were the two of you doing out so late at night?" I closed my eyes and sighed.

"We were only taking a walk. Not doing anything. I mean, not doing anything bad. Not that we would. Just walking through the village and talking. That's all." He laughed at my stuttered response and smacked

me on the back. His teasing was beginning to get annoying, but I knew he was just happy for me, even if I sometimes had my doubts that I could ever have an actual relationship with Astrid.

"Alright, alright. We can leave it at talking, Hiccup. I won't do any more prying. For now." He gave a small snort of laughter again. I was thankful we were moving the conversation along, even if we were almost to the arena. "So, are you ready for today? Tough opponents, those dragons." I nodded.

"I don't think I'll have too many problems handling the Terror. After all, they're small, and easily distracted." I turned my head to my father. "It is the Terror, right?" As I thought back to yesterday's session, I realized the only reason I believed the Terror was our next opponent was because the Gronckle had mentioned it.

"A good guess. And you'd be right. Traditionally, trainees face the Gronckle, then the Terror, and then the Nadder before moving on to the two biggest dragons kept for training purposes. But I remember when I was a boy, we actually had a Skrill in the ring! Just a young one, maybe a year old, but the feistiest dragon we'd ever kept! Only one we'd ever caged that escaped." He shook his head a little and let out a huff of breath. "It's a shame, too. Could've added its skull to the collection on display at the Meade Hall." I felt my stomach tighten uncomfortably when my father mentioned that. The Meade Hall was used for a number of things, including official meetings with friendly tribes. Because of this, it was decorated in the usual Viking manner, which ranged from weapons to dragon skulls. I never liked seeing that collection of skulls at the far end of the hall, even before Toothless. Now, seeing it isn't just unnerving. It's absolutely disgusting, and one of the reasons I rarely have an appetite when I'm there.

"Yeah, probably..." I let my voice trail off a bit before attempting to jump to a new topic. "So, dad. I still have quite a bit left to do in the smithy, and I only have it for five more days. So I was hoping I could spend the rest of the day there. Gobber... Doesn't need the forge today, does he?" My father's happy, reminiscent face dropped to a look of mild annoyance when I mentioned the result of my bet with Gobber. He nodded.

"Gobber spent most of yesterday working in the forge. Actually managed to start making all of the weapons I'd commissioned him to do after we finished inventory. So yes, you can have the forge today." I nodded, keeping in mind how quickly I was going to have to work on the new gear for Toothless. When I'd originally asked for a week of private forge access, I hadn't known that my father would be asking Gobber to forge a few dozen new weapons. Luckily, I knew I wouldn't need an entire week to build the new harness, considering I'd finished more than half of the tailfin in one day.

"Alright. Thanks, dad. I'll be quick about it, and if I finish early I'll let you know." He put a hand on my shoulder in response as I walked into the open mouth of the ring, meeting Gobber and the other students in the center. My father closed the inner gate and walked over to us.

"Righ', we're all here. Day two of dragon training! Today, we'll be facing... The Terrible Terror!" Gobber's inflection made the dragon seem dangerous. If anyone could understand them like I can, they

would know almost immediately that the Terror is about as deadly as a housecat if you aren't trying to kill it.

"Wait, you mean we're only fighting a Terror today? Those things are smaller than Ruffnut's brain." Tuffnut's comment earned him a shield to the helmet as Ruffnut quickly swung at him. Laughing a bit, Gobber responded.

"Don' underestimate the Terror, Tuffnut. It's small, but it can still pack a punch! Nearly lost a finger ta one a them little things when I was yer age. Probably woulda, too, if I hadn' lost me whole hand tha next week. Terrors have some bad venom, an' it can cost ya if yer not careful." He grabbed the lever next to the cage door, looking to my father for a signal to proceed. Before telling Gobber to unlock the cage, he spoke.

"The Terror lesson usually doesn't take very long, and it isn't very serious, but it has a very important point: you will most likely never fight a Terror one on one. They're pack animals, so you can always expect to find them raiding in groups. Three or four of them aren't much of a problem, but Terror packs can range from a few to a few dozen. Keep that in mind if you ever come across a pack in a raid. There's no shame in retreating from a battle you can't win alone." He turned to Gobber. "Go ahead and open the door." With a tug and a click, the feed door to the cage unlocked. Almost immediately, the little Terror popped out. The twins, Snotlout and Fishlegs backed up a little, readying their shields and weapons, just in case. Astrid pretended to, but the look on her face told me she was taking this about as seriously as I was. I considered stepping up to the little dragon in hopes that she would see me and retreat to her cage. I was stopped by the sound of her purring turning to speech.

"_Oh! Hiccup. It's you! Thanks for all the fish. Do you have more? Maybe a mouse?"_ She was keeping her eyes on the other trainees as she spoke to me, and I was beginning to get worried she had forgotten our deal when a muffled squawk came from the cage to the right. Everyone turned to it, but only I knew what it meant.

"_TERROR! Like I told you! Do it and get back in your cage!"_ Suddenly I was trying very hard not to smile at how absurd this whole situation was becoming.

"_OH! Oh. Sorry. Sorry, Hiccup. Sometimes I get distracted._" With a slight huff, the terror began dragging its claws against the stone floor, faking a growl. She looked around, staring intently into the eyes of each teen. She spat a stream of fire at Tuffnut, only using enough to set a small amount of his hair on fire. He turned and ran, getting doused by a bucket of water Gobber had picked up after walking away from the door. The Terror kept growling and snapped rather quickly at Snotlout, coming within a few inches of one of his legs before jumping away. When she turned to me, she went silent and stopped moving. After a few seconds of being locked in place, she backed up a little before spinning around and scurrying back into her feed door. With a squeeze, she slipped inside. I smacked the lever back up with the axe I'd grabbed again that morning, a loud click telling me that the lock had engaged properly. I turned to the group just in time to see Fishlegs's hammer hit the floor. The look of utter surprise on his face was one I knew I'd never forget. I fought the urge to laugh as my father spoke up again.

"Like I said, it doesn't usually take long. Very well done, Hiccup! I don't know what you did, but that Terror looked terrified when it saw you!" He looked proud of me again, and it felt like I was being cut by a knife. But I knew it was necessary. "Trainees! That's all for today. I want you to never forget what I've said about how dangerous those things can be in numbers. You're free to leave. Gobber," he gestured to the gate of the ring, "I've got some errands I'm going to need help on. Let's get going." Without argument, Gobber nodded and followed my father from the ring. I went to start walking after them when Snotlout grabbed me.

"Snotlout, what-"

"Shut up until they leave." I knew I wouldn't have much of a chance of getting away from the entire group, since it seemed they all wanted to keep me where I was. I obliged, knowing I'd have to face these questions eventually. Once Gobber and my father were gone, Snotlout let me go. He was about to speak when Ruffnut knocked him out of the way.

"Alright, Fishbone, what the Hel did you just do? That Terror looked like it was afraid of you." I shrugged, backing up a little from her.

"I didn't do anything! I was just standing here!" My brain was running through possible ways out of this mess when something came to mind. "Like I said, I spent a lot of time in the woods. Maybe I rubbed up against a plant, or something, that dragons don't like? That would explain it, because I didn't actually do anythi-"

"STOP MAKING EXCUSES!" Ruffnut screamed at me, closing the gap I'd put between us. She looked like she was about to say something else when someone began shouting at us.

"OI! You kids! Lessons are over! Out of the ring, now!" Our conversation being interrupted by the morning guard seemed to have a jarring effect on the other teenagers. Without saying anything else, Snotlout, Fishlegs and the twins turned and walked out of the ring. Astrid and I waited a few seconds before following them, knowing full well they'd be continuing their questioning the second we were out of earshot of the ring. Sure enough, the moment Snotlout was sure no one would interrupt us again, he stopped and turned to me.

"Okay, Useless, time to fess up. How have you gotten so good with the dragons? You'd better start telling us!" He reached out to grab my shirt, pulling his other fist back menacingly. I slid myself just out of his reach and tried to answer him.

"There's nothing to tell, Snotlout! I haven't gotten 'good' with the dragons, I'm just faster than I used to be. And as for the Terror, I haven't the slightest clue why it ran from me. I wasn't trying to threaten it at all, it just acted like I was." I hoped that would be enough to calm him down, but I doubted it. Before he could say anything, though, Astrid stepped between us.

"Hiccup's not hiding anything. He does spend a lot of time in the woods, and he very well could have come into contact with something dragons avoid. It's not that unbelievable." I felt a surge of gratitude for Astrid that was slightly cut off by Fishlegs speaking up.

"There are three species of vine on this island that result in rashes and itching as well as two species of berry that cause high fever and vomiting. If there are five different plants that we know of on this island that are harmful to us, there's probably at least one that affects dragons." Fishlegs backed away from Snotlout a little. "Hiccup very well could be telling us the truth." Snotlout looked from Astrid to Fishlegs, the scowl on his face indicating how he felt about the two of them coming to my defense.

"Even if he is telling the truth, I still don't believe him." Snotlout turned to me. "When I find out what you're hiding, I'll give you another pair of black eyes." He turned and stomped off, leaving Ruffnut and Tuffnut with us. Ruff still looked angry with me, but had apparently calmed down enough to speak in a calm demeanor.

"Look, I guess I can't really blame you for not telling us how you scared off that Terror without doing anything, but we're going to need to know eventually. Especially if it could help keep us alive." She said nothing else after that, turning with her brother to follow Snotlout in silence. I shook my head and turned to Astrid.

"Is it strange that I'm not actually lying to them, and yet, I feel like I am?" I asked. Astrid turned to me and smirked.

"You're too nice for your own good sometimes, you know that, don't you?" She punched me on the shoulder. "Don't worry about them. Any of them. Once they find out what you're really doing, they'll understand why you've been acting the way you have. I did." I grinned a little and went to thank Astrid when I was both cut off and startled by a forgotten Fishlegs.

"Speaking of what you're really doing, I want you guys to tell me. I've got way too many questions to just let you walk away again." He crossed his large arms, looking down at me with a slight frown. Slowly, I nodded to him.

"Fine. But you need to listen very carefully to what I say. This is more important than you could possibly imagine, and the truth of what's really going on is going to change everything." He gave me a confused look. "I mean it. Everything. Dragon training, raids, our oh-so-tasteful Viking decor, our very way of life? All wrong." I pointed back to the village. "I'll explain more in the forge. We'll need more privacy than a public walkway." I turned to walk, hearing both Fishlegs and Astrid doing the same.

* * *

><p>As the three of us entered the smithy, I quickly threw closed the shutters to the receiving area and hung a large cloth over the door-less entrance. Much of the forge area is viewable from the outside, since the entrance is so massive. One of the things I hadn't considered is just how hot an enclosed forge can get when there's really no way for the heat to escape, so I had no choice but to work in an uncomfortably warm building. With that thought in mind, I turned to Fishlegs as I began heating up the coals to finish Toothless's tailfin.<p>

"I hope you're wearing a shirt underneath that huge bearskin tunic, because it's about to get really hot in here with that cloth over the

entrance." Fishlegs looked at the forge coals and then back to me.

"Guess I'll just have to deal with it, then." He glanced back over to the hearth before asking the question I was waiting for. "Hiccup, what exactly did you want privacy in the forge for, anyway?" I took a deep breath and let it back out slowly. It was go time, no matter what the outcome. I just hoped it would be the outcome I was aiming for.

"It's a long story. A very, very long story that I'm still having a hard time believing." Astrid was nodding in silent agreement. I pumped the bellows of the forge a few times before walking over to and entering the storage-workshop. From there, I continued. "Back during the last dragon raid, as everyone now knows, I was testing out a weapon on one of the cliffs of Berk." I walked back out of my workshop area with a large bucket of scales and the unfinished tailfin. Fishlegs looked very confused as to what I was holding. "As usual, no one paid any attention to what I was saying. So I went to prove it myself." I dumped the scales on the forge. Fishlegs eyes went wide when he realized what they were.

"Are... Are those dragon scales?" He slowly and cautiously approached the forge. "And they're... Black." He turned his head to me, slowly. "Hiccup, what...?" He seemed to be fighting the only logical explanation.

"I really did shoot down that Night Fury." I used a pair of tongs to spread out the scales. Fishlegs was just staring at me, not saying anything. Astrid walked between Fishlegs and the exit, just in case.

"You mean... You killed a NIGHT FURY and didn't TELL ANYONE?!" He wasn't quite shouting, but I still needed to stop him from getting any louder.

"Fishlegs, quiet down. I didn't tell anyone because I didn't kill him." Fishlegs gaped at me, apparently shocked into silence by my statement. I stoked the forge a few more times before reaching in with some pliers. "I couldn't kill him. He was tied up and completely at my mercy, but I couldn't do it. So I cut him free. And the strangest thing about it is, after I cut the ropes, he didn't kill me. He pinned me to a rock, roared at me and then tried to fly off. As it turns out, I'd ripped off his left tailfin when I shot him out of the air. Now he can't fly without my help." I looked back over to Fishlegs, who was still staring at me. He was, however, capable of talking again.

"He can't fly... Without your help. Hiccup... How can that possibly be true? There's no way anyone could ever ride the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself! Did you really think I'd believe that?" He looked back over to the scales, and in that moment of silence I tried to regain control of the conversation.

"Fishlegs, please stop talking and let me fini-"

"But, how would you have the scales... And the painting... You mean, the painting- THAT'S WHAT A NIGHT FURY LOOKS LIKE?!" His large hands flew up and clamped to his head, knocking his helmet onto the workbench next to the forge, scattering an assortment of tools to the

floor. Knowing that would have echoed out of the building, I stopped what I was doing and turned to him completely.

"Fishlegs, really! Please stop rambling and let me finish what I have t-

"How could you have... How did you get those scales without getting torn to shreds? And if it can't fly, why haven't you told anyone where it is? Hiccup, that thing is dangerous! If someone comes across where you've hidden it, they could be mauled! We need to bring your father to where this dragon is, we need to kill i-

"FISHLEGS! Stop. Talking!" My patience with his nervous breakdown was wearing thin, and from the look he was giving me, I could tell he understood that.

"S-Sorry, Hiccup." He quickly walked over to the mess he'd made, grabbed all of the scattered tools in a large fist and replaced them on the workbench. Grabbing his helmet, he leaned against a nearby wall of the forge and slid to a sitting position. "Please continue." I shook my head and went back to work.

"Like I said, he can't get very far off the ground without my help. I've been flying with him for the last three weeks, but I've been keeping him a secret since the last raid. He isn't dangerous, and he's taught me that no dragon truly is. That's why I don't want anyone to know about him; I don't want him getting hurt. Because, as strange as it may seem, that dragon is my friend. And before Astrid and I started talking, he was my only friend on this island. I hope you can understand why I'd want to keep his existence a secret." I looked down at Fishlegs, who sat there, staring at the floor. After a few seconds, he slowly nodded. My stomach finally unclenched. I had an audience with Fishlegs. "Good. Now, if I were you I'd get as comfortable as you can down there, because this is going to take a while to explain." He shifted a little, and looking down again showed me he was now lying on his back with his fingers laced together on his stomach. His eyes were aimed, unblinking, at the ceiling.

"Alright. I'm listening."

* * *

><p>A little over an hour later, I'd covered the entire experience of meeting and befriending Toothless, intentionally leaving out the location of the cove and the fact that I understood Dragonese. I still wasn't certain Fishlegs wouldn't turn on me the second he was given the opportunity, and I had a distinct feeling he wouldn't believe in the slightest that dragons had a language. Despite that, he hadn't objected to anything I'd said so far, and the blank stare he was wearing on his face had slowly been replaced with a look of concentration as the story unfolded. After Astrid and I finished revealing the Red Death, Fishlegs sat up and leaned against the wall of the forge, clenching his hands together in his lap. For the first time in an hour, he spoke.<p>

"So... Is this all real? How... Can it be real?" He was staring at a far corner of the forge, not looking at either Astrid or I. His question wasn't aimed at anyone in particular, and I wondered if he'd even realized he had said it out loud. Astrid decided to answer him,

considering she'd done most of the talking for the second half of our story.

"I still have a hard time accepting it sometimes, but believe me, everything Hiccup and I just explained is true." She left her seat on the workbench and walked over to Fishlegs, who had returned to his feet. "And it's only the beginning. If our parents ever find out where the nest is, they'll try to take it. And unless we do something before then, they'll all be killed." Terror struck his face.

"It... It can't be that... That bad, that big, can it? Would they really all... Die?" His response was slow and crackled. I could tell by the way he was talking that he was trying his hardest to not believe what she had to say.

"Fishlegs, listen to me. The Red Death is way too big to take on with normal Viking weaponry. Our parents would have no idea what they'd be walking into. The only way we can stand a chance against that thing is with the dragons, but if we plan on using them, we're going to need help." Astrid turned back to me, glancing at the tailfin sitting in the hearth. "Hiccup, you should let that cool off and put it away. We're going to have to get to the Meade Hall soon, and after that you need to go let Toothless know he's going to be meeting someone else just after sundown tonight." I nodded, knowing well that the sooner we had the help of all of our friends, the sooner we could start Dragon Taming. I finished mounting the scale I was working on, threw the rest of the free scales back in their bucket and pulled out the nearly-finished tailfin with my pliers. The fin kept glistening for a few seconds after I pulled it from the fire, but quickly stopped as it began to cool. Once the scales no longer looked wet, I reached out and lightly pressed a finger against it. As I'd figured, the scales were barely warm.

"Amazing... Hiccup, that's already cool?" Fishlegs slowly inched over to inspect the tailfin, as though afraid of the scales it was made of. I placed the fin in my hand and opened it so he could get a better view, and after letting him gawk for a few seconds, I closed it and hid it away in my workshop. Returning to the hearth of the forge, I had a final question on my mind.

"So, do we have your word you won't tell anyone about this?" I said as I walked up to him. He looked down at me for a few seconds before answering.

"If you can actually show me a Night Fury that responds to the name 'Toothless' and doesn't try to incinerate us, I won't say a word to anyone." Fishlegs shook his head. "I'm still not sure I believe it, though. But I'll keep my mouth shut until you can prove it to me."

"Deal. Meet Astrid and I in the plaza at dusk. We'll take you to him then." Fishlegs nodded, and with that, we left for the hall.

* * *

><p>I quickly ate through an uncomfortably quiet lunch with Snotlout and the twins and then hurried out to the woods alone. I felt like going on a long flight before returning to the forge, and considering Astrid would be busy for the next few hours with axe practice, I had nothing else to do. My mind slowly drifted to Toothless, and soon I'd

found myself daydreaming of us splitting open the clouds. I stayed there for a little while before the unceremonious crumpling of leaves snapped me back to reality. Not slowing my pace, I kept walking, making sure to avoid stepping heavily while I listened for anything else unusual. Again, I heard a light rustling of foliage, this time followed by a faint, muffled word. Cursing under my breath, I began taking a very scenic route to Toothless Cove in the hopes I could lose whoever was following me. I continued wandering and listening, eventually bursting into a sprint when I no longer heard anyone nearby. I reached a back entrance to the cove and slid into it quietly, hoping whoever was following me hadn't noticed. I climbed down to the bottom and made for the den, which was housing a large mass of sleeping black scales. Toothless's bright yellow-green eyes popped open, and with a stretch he ambled out of the little cave.<p>

"Afternoon, bud. Sleep well?" I grabbed the riding tack and started equipping it to him as he nodded in response. I threw on my riding vest, gathered a large fishing net from the den and jumped to my seat. Ready and waiting, Toothless wasted no time getting us into the air and to the ocean. After another successful catch, we'd landed in one of our usual resting spots: a massive field of dragon nip. Toothless made himself a veritable cocoon of nip and began to devour his large collection of freshly killed fish as I sprawled back in the grass next to him. I stared at the thickening cloud cover as I began to speak.

"So, I think someone was trying to follow me through the woods today. I'm sure I lost them, since I ran the long way around the cove and squeezed in through that crack in the rock wall, but we should still be careful when we go back. Last thing I want is Snotlout seeing us land." I put my hands behind my head and closed my eyes when Toothless responded.

"_Is there any reason why you think it was him and not someone else? Other than the fact that he constantly targets you, I mean."_ I translated the grumbling coming from the bundle of grass next to me and sent my logic in return.

"Well, whoever was following me was careless, since they managed to mumble loud enough for me to recognize it as a voice. Say what you will about grown Vikings being belligerent, but when they're stalking something, they're usually dead silent. Besides, I really doubt an adult was following me, since they all still don't really care what I do in the woods." I furrowed my brow a little in thought. "The only person it really could be is Snotlout. Astrid has no reason to, the twins were heading to the docks when I left the Meade Hall and Fishlegs..." My voice trailed off. I'd almost forgotten the main reason I'd come out here. "Well, Fishlegs knows about... All of this. And he wants to meet you tonight. We're not doing it in the cove, though. Other than Astrid, I don't want anyone knowing that the place even exists." I heard Toothless purr in agreement before he spoke again.

"_Have your mate bring him here, to the nip field. It's as good a place as any."_ I grunted in agreement, but rolled my eyes at Toothless calling Astrid my 'mate' again.

"Sounds like a plan. And would you stop calling Astrid my mate? Just because we spend a lot of time together doesn't mean anything..."

Toothless laughed a little when I said that. I slapped my hand to my head as he responded.

"_Oh, quiet, Hiccup. I'm just having a little fun. Even so, I don't think you have anything to worry about. Focus on the task at hand and let your relationship with the girl take its course. I doubt you'll be disappointed."_ I couldn't resist a small smile when I'd translated that.

"Thanks, Toothless. I'll try to keep that in mind. After all, I do have more important things to worry about than Astrid. I suppose I should focus more on them."

"Yeah, stop focusing on Astrid. That's my job. And who the Hel are you talking to, you little wimp?" I shot straight up when that voice broke through the air, the blood in my veins feeling as though it had crystallized.

"S-Snotlout? What, uh, what a-are you doing he- uh, here..?" I jumped up and walked in front of the large mound of dragon nip that hid Toothless, hoping beyond hope that Snotlout wouldn't notice that bulge of grass hiding not ten feet behind me.

"None of your business, Useless. Now who are you talking to?" He looked around the field. "I don't see any old guys. Who were you calling 'toothless'? Or have you finally lost it?" He laughed. "Not that there's anything in that weird-ass head of yours worth keeping to begin with." I heard a low, irritated grumble come from the grass behind me.

"_Insolent little _child._ I should teach him to watch his mouth..."_ Oh, this was bad and getting _worse._

"NO! I mean, uh... No... There's no one, uh, here. I'm just... Relaxing! By myself. And talking. To myself. Alone." In my nervous, anxious state, I didn't notice Snotlout's left hand shoot forward and grab my shirt.

"Perfect. We're alone, I've got a handful of your shirt, and no one's here to protect you. Why don't you try dodging this?" With a swift swing, his fist came forward and nearly connected with my jaw when I turned and swiped my left leg under Snotlout's right, bringing him to the ground. Still holding me by my shirt, he dragged me down with him. After a slight struggle I managed to pull myself from his grip and stand back up.

"Snotlout! Can't you act like a decent human being for once and just leave me alone? Go back to the village, and quit following me through the woods. You're not going to get what you're looking for by force, so stop trying." I straightened my shirt and vest, stepping back as he leapt to his feet.

"What are you talking about? You can get anything with force." His blunt statement irritated me. It's rare for me to get angry, but Snotlout's always had a way of getting under my skin. "Well, looks like little Hiccup's angry! That look doesn't work very well for you. Why don't you let me help you get rid of it?" He lunged forward at me, trying to knock me down. I dodged it the first time, but his second attempt was successful. He had me pinned to the ground on my back, only an arm's reach away from Toothless. "So, if I knock out a

few teeth, will that keep you from showing off that ugly smile of yours?" I was about to try pulling myself out from underneath him when a ****very**** angry growl came from just to my left.

"_He's had his fun, but I think it's time it ended._" I was frozen in place just as Snotlout was, but for an entirely different reason. Revealing Toothless now could blow our entire plan, but I wouldn't have much of a chance at stopping an angry fire breathing reptile who weighs several times more than what I do.

"TOOTHLESS, STOP-" Too late. In a flash, the grass concealing my best friend was shredded, and with a swift flick of Toothless's tail, Snotlout had been knocked off of me and into the tall blades of nip we had been arguing in. I jumped to my feet as Snotlout's terrified cries broke through my thoughts.

"**RUN!**" Snotlout scurried to his feet, only to have Toothless knock him down again. With a leap, he pounced on the burly teen. A high-pitched scream echoed across the field, and with an urge to laugh I'd realized Snotlout was screaming like a child.

"Snotlout, calm down. He's not-"

"HICCUP! PLEASE, HELP ME!" The utter terror in his voice suddenly made me feel dirty. Despite being put through seven years of Hel from him, I knew I couldn't let this continue. I wouldn't be a bully now that I finally had the upper hand.

"Alright... Toothless, get off of him. I think he's learned his lesson about attacking me." I walked over to the dragon and scratched him behind one of his right ear flaps.

"_Are you sure? I barely even touched him._" Toothless gave me a look of near-confusion, apparently wondering why I'd abandon the chance to get revenge on my own personal tormentor. I glanced down to Snotlout, who was still terrified and now, pale. He quietly tried talking.

"Hiccup, wha-" He was cut off by a growl.

'Toothless, please. Off." With a reluctant nod, Toothless backed off and sat on his haunches next to me. Snotlout slowly lifted his head up to us, his eyes as wide as Gobber's stomach.

"H... Hiccup... How... That's a... D-d-d..." He looked as though he might pass out at any second.

"Yes, Snotlout, it's a dragon. Specifically, a Night Fury. And there's no reason to fear him unless you're trying to hurt me." Snotlout stared at us in silence for a few moments before quickly leaping from his place in the grass. He started running to the forest in the distance, not bothering to look back at us. To my left, Toothless began purring.

"_He's going to tell the village if we don't stop him, you know that, right?_" He focused an eye on me.

"Don't worry about it. We're nowhere near the cove, no one in the village will believe him in the slightest and either way he's probably going to be lost in that forest for a few hours. He didn't

even leave in the right direction. The village is over that way." I heard Toothless cackle a bit as I pointed in the opposite direction.

"_Still, we should probably remind him not to tell anyone."_ Toothless's ears twitched slightly as he stared in the direction Snotlout fled. "_I can still hear him running. Might we have a little more fun with him?"_ I considered for a moment, and with that, I had an idea. Wordlessly, I jumped on Toothless's back.

"Let's go pick him up and then fly off to one of the outlier islands. If he can't run, I think he'd be more inclined to listen." Toothless grunted and took off, and within seconds we'd caught up to Snotlout. With a fell swoop, Toothless gathered the terrified boy in his claws and then headed for an island in the distance. It was far enough away that no one would notice us or even be able to reach us if they did. Toothless landed, dropping Snotlout without warning as we neared the ground. I jumped to the ground just as Snotlout regained his bearings and stumbled to his feet.

"Hiccup, what- What are you- WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH A DRAGON?!" He spun around again, apparently looking for an escape route. Failing to find any, he turned back to me. "What were you planning on doing... Here with me? Not..." He looked at Toothless. "You're not gonna try and get... Revenge on me or anything, are you?" I shook my head in response.

"No, Snotlout. If I was planning on getting revenge on you, I wouldn't have asked Toothless to let you go. I already had you at my mercy, and I gave it up." He looked at me wordlessly. "Look, this is a long story and to be honest I don't have the time or the patience to explain it to you right now. I just want you to know a few things before I bring you back to Berk. One, dragons aren't anything like what we think they are. Two, This entire three-hundred year war hinges on a single, massive dragon queen that we don't have a chance against without the help of the dragons. Three, if our parents ever find the nest, that queen will slaughter all of them. If you blow this for me, if you tell everyone on in Berk what I'm doing, you will single-handedly bring about the deaths of everyone we know." I thought for a second while Snotlout stared at the sight of Toothless crooning at my hand scratching him below the jaw. "Oh, and if you keep your mouth shut and actually listen to me for once, you'll be training a dragon of your own. Probably the Nightmare."

"The Nightmare... What are you talking about? Training? " My mind kept flashing back to Fishlegs's reaction. Would the twins have just as hard a time with this as either Fishlegs or Snotlout?

"Yes, the Nightmare. As in, you'll be taught how to trust, care for and eventually fly with her. She'll learn to do the same." I walked over to him and looked him in the eye. "I'm going to need the group's help on this, otherwise the war is never going to end. But no one else can find out, so please, don't say anything." He stared at me, still with eyes as large as dinner plates. "Deal?" His blank stare faded into a scowl.

"Of... Of course not! You're siding with the dragons! Once the village finds out about this, they'll tie you to a mast and ship you off with the rest of the outcasts!" He pointed out to the ocean.

"Oh? And how are they going to find out about this when the only way back to the island is by dragon?" I hoped the comment would finally deflate him.

"You- You wouldn't leave me here. You're too nice." I shook my head at him.

"I'm nice, to a point. But after seven years of putting up with you constantly bothering me, my patience is running very thin. With you, at least. So yes, I would leave you here. At least until I know you won't be telling anyone about this." I stared him down for once, waiting for a response. He glanced between Toothless and I, staring intently at the far island we called home.

"You little... No. I'm not doing it. I'm not agreeing to anything. And I'm not listening to anything else. Now bring me home." His arrogance still stood like a mountain, and I'd had more than enough of it.

"Were you not listening to me? Snotlout, I will leave you here." I gave him an incredulous look as he backed away from Toothless a little more and slowly nodded his head at me with a grin on his face.

"Sure you will, Hiccup. And when I'm not around after sunset, what are you going to tell the others?" He was apparently certain that statement would win him the argument. Never the most observant Viking, Snotlout missed the gaping flaw in his logic.

"Hm. What will I say to them?" I put my hand to my chin, pretending to be deep in thought. "Oh, I know! 'I have no idea where Snotlout is. I haven't seen him since lunch.' Yeah, that'll probably work. I mean, what am I, your personal _keeper?_" I hopped back in the saddle, and with a familiar click, Toothless and I took off. I could hear Snotlout screaming something unintelligible at me, but within seconds he was completely drowned out by the wind.

We did a few stunts over Berk to calm my nerves before landing back in the cove. I gave Toothless a quick scrub down and then made my way to where Astrid had told me she'd be practicing. I found her sitting on the ground near a scarred pine tree, cooling off and sharpening her axe. When she heard me coming, she stood and stretched.

"I figured you'd be with Toothless for longer. Was he fine with meeting Fishlegs so soon?" Astrid asked as she checked out her axe.

"He was fine with it, but we're not meeting in the cove. I don't really want anyone but the three of us knowing about that place." Astrid nodded and put her axe back in its holster.

"Not to interrupt you, but we should just get going back to the forge. I've done enough practicing, I think." In silent agreement, I turned with her to walk back to Berk as I continued.

"I'll need you to bring Fishlegs to the dragon nip field, since it's far enough from the cove and we both know where it is." Astrid gave me a slightly perplexed look before questioning me.

"Well, alright, but I thought you would want to keep that place a secret too? I mean, Toothless loves that field." I nodded and sighed.

"Well, I did, originally. But earlier today, Toothless and I went fishing and then landed in that nip field so he could eat. And then, uh..." I trailed off, still thinking about how I wanted to word this.

"Then... What, Hiccup?" I focused my eyes away from her and responded.

"Snotlout kinda wandered into the field and saw us. And then freaked out and ran for the trees." Astrid nearly dropped her axe in surprise.

"HE WHAT?!" She stopped me in my tracks with a firm grip on my shoulder. "What did you do to keep him quiet? Did he get away? If he gets to the village, we could both be in deep sh-"

"Astrid! Relax. I didn't let him go anywhere." I put my hand on hers and led it from my shoulder. Slightly calmer, she and I started walking again. "Toothless and I sort of ... Kidnapped him. And when he wouldn't listen to me, we may have left him stranded on one of the islands near Berk." I heard a slight snort come from Astrid's throat.

"You... Kidnapped Snotlout? You kidnapped him and left him on an island only reachable by dragon." She let out a light chuckle. "Add that to the ever-growing list of things I could never have imagined you'd be doing." She punched me on the shoulder again in her usual joking manner. I smiled and nonchalantly rubbed the area as she continued. "First Fishlegs, and now Snotlout... Looks like we're gonna be out late again tonight." I nodded in silence, slightly irritated that I'd have more of my father's comments to deal with come tomorrow.

"Yeah. And I'm still not sure how we're going to get Snotlout to keep his mouth shut, other than leaving him on that island. Which doesn't sound like a bad idea, to be honest." Astrid grinned before replying.

"Well, if everything goes well with Fishlegs tonight, we can explain the situation to him. I'm sure he'll be able to help. Though I have to agree, leaving Snotlout on an island by himself for a few days does sound pretty enticing." We shared a small laugh as we exited the trees into Berk and headed for the empty smithy.

* * *

><p>Hiccup had left for the cove after we finished in the forge near sundown. I made for the plaza to wait for Fishlegs when I saw him pacing near his house. I walked over to him and heard him having a panic attack.<p>

"...won't eat me, Hiccup and Astrid won't let him. But it's a dragon we're talking about here! You can't control a wild animal! I'll be torn to shreds-AH! Oh! Uh, Hi, Astrid. Was I taking too long? I was walking out the door to meet you and I... Had a bit of an existential crisis realizing that if you guys are telling the truth

then our entire lives have been a lie, and, well, it's..." He pulled in a large breath to continue, but I cut him off.

"Fishlegs, you're rambling again. Stop it. Everything is going to be fine, alright? Let's get going." I turned and headed for the forest, grabbing the cuff of Fishlegs's vest to make sure he followed suit. We passed the border of trees, and once I'd gathered my bearings, we headed to the dragon nip field. We were following a path of axe-marked trees that I knew would lead us to the field in question.

"So, uh.. Where's Hiccup at? I thought I'd be meeting the both of you." He looked around again, apparently looking for the Dragon Trainer in question. I turned my eyes to him and responded.

"Hiccup went to get Toothless from the cove. We're meeting up in a field because Hiccup wants the cove's location to stay a secret." I stopped by a tree covered in axe marks and ran my hand over them. I glanced around, and after seeing another marred tree, I changed my path a little and kept walking as Fishlegs spoke again.

"I can understand. It's not like anyone's given him any reason to trust them. Except you, I mean." His eyebrows went up a little as he turned his neck-less head to me. "There's not... Anything, uh... Going on, is th-"

"Fishlegs, just shut up and follow me." The last thing I wanted to do right now(or ever) was talk about my... Feelings with someone. It was one thing to talk to Hiccup about it, but I wasn't about to talk about that with anyone else on Berk, with a possible exception being my mother.

"Uh, right. Sorry, it's really not my place..." He stopped talking, and with that, we walked in total silence to the field. I kept my focus on the axe-marked trees, though part of my attention was diverted upward. I was listening for the sound of Night Fury wings as the trees finally began to thin and our destination came into view. I walked into the tall grass first, heading toward the higher ground. Fishlegs waded into the field after me, running his hands over the blades. He'd apparently never seen them before. "Woah. This grass is much taller than any of the other grasses I've seen on the island..." He plucked a blade and kept talking while I scanned my eyes over the twilight sky, looking and listening for a distinct shadow and familiar screech. "Much more firm than the normal wild grass that grows near the farms. It smells almost like... Tea leaves. The blades themselves contain some sort of oily residue that leaves a pleasant cooling sensation on the skin..." He kept droning on about grass(of all things, considering we're here to meet a dragon) when I heard a very loud and very angry scream come from behind a tree.

"SHUT UP ALREADY!" I heard Ruffnut scream as Tuffnut came flying out from behind a few pine trees. Tuff had been thrown into the grass by his sister, who jumped in after him. The blades of nip around them were shaking as they wrestled, obscured by the nip.

"Oh, ffffff..." I put my hands on my face in worry. Hiccup wouldn't see them as he came in, and I had no way of letting him know what was going on before it was too late. I immediately flipped around to the twins, but before I could try to yell at them to leave, the distinct whistle of the Night Fury's wings came from over the ocean. I turned

my head to look for him, which proved difficult with the sun now below the horizon. "Oh, this is bad. You two!" I whipped back to the twins again, who were now lying motionless on the ground. "Shut up and don't go anywhere!" They just stared at me as the sound of flapping filled the air. Off in the distance, Hiccup came running up to us, Toothless galloping a ways behind him. Fishlegs froze when he saw the dragon up close, but didn't try to run. The twins still couldn't see anything, not having moved an inch since Toothless flew by.

"Evening, Astrid, Fishlegs." He turned his head to me and looked at me questioningly. "Astrid, what's wrong?" I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Hiccup looked from me to Fishlegs, and then to the disturbed bit of grass just behind us. He closed his eyes and smacked his hand to his head, sighing. "The twins are here, aren't they?"

* * *

><p>Toothless may call me something of a pessimist at times, but I saw this coming. My plans always manage to fail at crucial moments, and here I am, standing in a field with a dragon and four other people instead of two.<p>

"_It seems Astrid was a bit careless this time around. What are we going to do, Hiccup? I can catch one of them, maybe two. But I couldn't possibly hold the three at once."_ I nodded, and despite knowing it could make things worse, I turned and responded.

"We'll just have to play this close to the chest. We can still play dumb as long as they don't have any proof." Toothless nodded to me as Fishlegs stammered out an attempt at a sentence.

"H-Hiiccup, is, did that D-dragon just... Nod? At you? When you..." He stopped speaking and just gaped at Toothless. I looked to the twins, who were now standing and staring at the sight of me standing with my back to a dragon. Ruffnut opened her mouth, but didn't try to say anything. Tuffnut, on the other hand, had a huge grin on his face.

"Hiccup... Is that a _saddle_?" He walked forward slowly, his eyes locked on Toothless's riding gear. "You _flew_ in here? On this _dragon_? He let you put a saddle on him?" I nodded, and with a slight sigh I opened my mouth to speak.

"Yes. It's a long story I'm getting very tired of repeating, but I'd rather get it out of the way no-"

"Hiccup, that's great, but shut it. We can go over the history later, so just answer me some questions." Relieved he just wanted answers and not another hour-long diatribe, I nodded. "Alright. For starters, is that a Night Fury?"

"Yes."

"It never tries to bite you, or set you on fire, or anything?"

"No."

"Is it like a pet, or something?" I shook my head.

"No. Toothless and I are the best of friends. I don't own him."

"Hm. Alright... Now, this question is important: can you teach me how to fly on the back of a dragon? Because I've dreamed about doing that since I was five." A sweet relief came over me, washing off most of my doubt that this night was falling apart.

"Funny you should mention that. Like I said, there's a long story involved, but I'll keep it simple." I stepped back a few paces and placed a hand on Toothless's head, scratching his ear nonchalantly. I pulled in a deep breath and began. "Dragons are actually a very intelligent, peaceful race of creatures being controlled by a massive queen called the Red Death that's the size of a small mountain who could easily devour a Nightmare whole. If we get rid of the queen with the help of the dragons, they'll stop raiding us and we'll be able to live in peace with them. But the only way we can do that is if I teach all of you how to train the dragons in the kill ring in secret, because if our parents ever manage to find that nest, there won't be a single adult of fighting age left alive in the village." I caught my breath as Astrid spoke up.

"You're getting good at that." I smirked and nodded at her while Tuff kept talking.

"So we have to break like every Viking rule there is to save our entire village from the clutches of a huge Dragonlord? And we get to do it on our own _dragons?_" He turned to his sister, who was now standing right next to him, wearing the same devilish grin.

"THIS IS AWESOME!" They both cried in unison. Finally relaxed (and absolutely ASTOUNDED by my luck), I wrapped an arm around Toothless's head and started scratching under his jaw when Fishlegs decided to join in the conversation, trying to point out a flaw in this plan.

"Uh, guys... How do you know if that R-Red Death is... Real?" Fishlegs looked worried, his eyes darting between all of us. Tuffnut stepped up to him.

"Hey Fish-for-brains, if you hadn't noticed, Hiccup's currently cuddling the neck of a dragon we were raised to think was a horrific monster." He pointed to me. "He could tell me he was Odin himself right now and I'd probably believe him. I don't need anything else." He turned back to Toothless and I with lights in his eyes. "Oh, this is gonna be the coolest thing _ever._ When do we start?" I let go of Toothless and smiled.

"Well, assuming Fishlegs is okay with all of this, we have to convince Snotlout to join our little adventure next. After that, we'll need to work together to get into the ring unnoticed. I was hoping the two of you might have a few varied ideas of how to keep the guard off our backs." Tuff just nodded as Ruffnut turned to Fishlegs and cracked her knuckles.

"If you blow this for us, I'll burn every book in the village. And then I'll break your thumbs." Fishlegs's eyes went wide and he quickly nodded, hiding his hands behind his back. "Alright, let's get back to the village. I'll beat Snotlout until he agrees with us." I

noticed Astrid grin out of the corner of my eye as I held up a hand and shook my head.

"That won't be necessary. He stumbled upon Toothless and I in this field earlier today, and during a disagreement he forgot which one of us is friends with a dragon." I grinned. "He's been stranded on one of the islands of Berk since just after lunch." The twins burst out laughing, and so did Astrid again. I heard Toothless and even Fishlegs chuckle at it, as well. They quieted down and I continued. "I'll go fly back to the island, grab him and bring him here. We'll have to convince him ourselves before sunrise." The twins nodded at me, and so did Astrid. I looked at Fishlegs.

"Hiccup, this is going to be really dangerous. I don't like our odds of survival... But I can't really pass up an opportunity like this. If we can't reason with Snotlout..." He turned to Astrid and the twins. "I can hold him down. You guys do the rest." Tuffnut looked like he was close to tears of joy while Ruff started stretching.

"Go get the little snotface, Hiccup. And don't worry about the guard; Tuff and I have a few ideas to work with. Now go. We'll be waiting..." She winked at me, and with a small twist in my stomach, I nodded and turned away. It's not as though Ruffnut was ugly, by any stretch of the imagination. She was just far too... Rough, for my tastes. I took a hard breath and hopped on Toothless.

"Thanks, guys. I'll be right back." As we took off I could hear the twins whooping in the distance, mimicking my own feelings. Now I only had one more obstacle in my way before we really started Dragon Taming, and I had three newcomers to help me with it. The island came into view, and after a bit of scouting we found Snotlout curled up in a ball by a small, smoldering pile of embers. He shot up as we flew over, giving Toothless a perfect chance at grabbing him as we sped past. Ignoring his screams again, we flew back to the dragon nip field. It would be a long, sleepless night before training again tomorrow. I could only hope Stormfly would notice our lethargy and go easy on us, assuming everything else worked out.

* * *

><p>AN:**_ Well, there's that. Next chapter begins the real adventure, and the largest departure from the film._

_I'd also like to thank Ferdoos for some grammar fixes in the story so far. If you see any errors, let me know and I'll credit you in the footnote.

>

13. Luck Like Gravity

A/N:_ The first chapter of the new year. I'm still working on updating as frequently as I did before, but now that these chapters have gotten so long I'm finding that increasingly difficult to do. I'm probably just going to abandon any pretenses of scheduling and just release them when they're done. No point in rushing it._

* * *

><p>"Alright, guys, look. I'm sorry, okay? I won't say anything about

the stupid dragon, so would you PLEASE UNTIE ME?!" Snotlout finished his statement with a rather loud yell, and for the hundredth time that night Toothless unsheathed his bladelike fangs and let out an angry growl. Once more he silenced Snotlout and let loose a bit of laughter from the rest of the group, Fishlegs and Toothless himself included. I chuckled a little as I threw another log onto our campfire, warming my hands lightly before leaning back on Toothless's side. As I watched the fire grow, Ruffnut responded to Snotlout's request.<p>

"Oh, we know you won't say anything. Besides, who would believe you?" She laughed slightly as her brother continued the thought.

"Yeah, and even if he did say anything, we'd just tell everyone that Astrid finally clocked him upside the head and he's seeing things." Tuff laughed with his sister, stopping for a moment to address me in particular. "Man, I'm not trying to be an ass or anything, Hiccup, but why were you ever worried that someone would believe Snotlout about Toothless? I mean, come on. Everyone in this village sees how he treats you. They'd just think it was some stupid joke." He looked to Toothless, shaking his head in disbelief yet again. "Hel, you should've let him go to the village. They probably would've thought he'd gone crazy! I mean, really. You, Hiccup, taming a Night Fury?" He turned his head back to the fire, poking it with a stick. "I never would've believed it if I didn't see it myself." Tuff shook his head again and went quiet, leaving the faint crackling of the fire coupled with Toothless's muffled purring alone in the air. Despite enjoying the soothing combination, I decided to speak.

"So, does anyone have any questions?" I scanned my eyes across the group as I asked. "If you do, ask me now, because I've told this story at least five times over the last two days and I'm not planning on doing it again." Astrid smirked next to me, lightly punching me on the shoulder.

"Quit your whining, you big baby." I rubbed my arm and mimed her grin, per my usual reaction to her 'violent' affections. "Hm. You know, I've actually got something for you, Hiccup." I raised an eyebrow and shot her a confused glare. How she could have any questions for me I had no idea, considering she'd been in half of the story I'd finished telling to the group.

"Really? What could you want to know that I haven't already told you?" My mind ran over every major point I could think of pertaining to the Viking-Dragon war. Not one thing came to my mind that Astrid didn't already know. She laughed at my confusion and replied.

"Oh, I'm not talking about something that I don't know. I'm talking about something you intentionally left out of the story, remember?" My eyes shot open wide and I grinned a bit at the memory. I had completely avoided mentioning Dragonese to the others for the same reasons I'd avoided telling Fishlegs, but now that everyone in the group both knew of and accepted the truths that came along with Toothless, I saw no reason not to mention it. I went to open my mouth when Snotlout interrupted me again.

"Seriously, guys. I'm not gonna do anything or say anything that would put Hiccup or Toothless in danger, so cut me loose already. I've been tied to this damn tree for like three hours now and these ropes are really cutting into my wrists." I looked from him down to

my own wrists, my eyes glancing over a few scar lines I'd acquired over the years. Rubbing the rope-scars present there, I shook my head a little and looked to the twins, who were both looking at me and wearing uncomfortable frowns on their faces. Without saying a word, Tuff stood up and walked over to Snotlout, working at his ropes as Ruffnut quietly addressed me.

"Hiccup, you know, we're both really sorry about... Well, everything, really." She raised her eyes from the fire, looking at me directly. Her voice and facial features had a sincere quality about them. "I know you told us not to worry about it, but..." She sighed. "I've only been hanging around you as a friend for a little over two hours and I'm already feeling guilty about how we used to treat you." She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. "I've spent nearly my entire life pranking the entire village with Tuffnut, and not once did I feel bad about anything we did. You're making me a nice person, Hiccup. Stop it." I obliged her humor and gave her a smile and a laugh, Astrid doing the same. Using it as an entrance to our conversation, she spoke.

"He has a tendency to do that to a person. And if Toothless is anything to go by, Hiccup's going to be changing more than just a few people." Astrid leaned back against Toothless herself, and with a huff he wrapped his tail around her and I. To my utter surprise, Astrid used his tail as cover so no one noticed her take my hand and squeeze it. She didn't let go.

"You can say that again." Fishlegs cut in. He hadn't spoken during his second time listening to the back story, but apparently he was just waiting until it was over before saying anything. "Even if everything you try to do from here on out falls through, Hiccup, you've still changed all of Viking history. Forever." I smiled at his comment when I heard a sigh of relief come from my left, just behind him. Out of the darkness walked Tuffnut and Snotlout, both taking their places by the fire. Tuff sat down next to his sister near the dragon nip field while Snotlout shot me a small glare and seated himself across the fire from Toothless. A bit of pressure in my right hand caused me to glance at Astrid, who was grinning and gesturing at Snotlout. Despite agreeing to stay silent, he was obviously uncomfortable with Toothless's presence. He glared at me again before turning all of his attention to the fire. In the quiet seconds that passed, Fishlegs cleared his throat.

"So, Hiccup. Astrid said you left out part of the story?" His reminder caused everyone in the group, Snotlout included, to look at me. My grin resurfaced as I considered how I would break the news to them when Toothless started purring quite loudly, his sounds vibrating both Astrid and I.

"_I can't wait to see the look on Snotlout's face when he realizes I have a better grip on his language than he does."_ I laughed at his comment, nonchalantly replying to him despite everyone looking at me.

"Yeah, I don't think he'll be too pleased with that. Then again, I doubt he'll believe me to begin with." Toothless shook his head a little, his right eye staring at me intently.

"_I wouldn't be so certain. They're already willingly letting their guard down in the presence of a dragon, meaning they've accepted your

story as true. Knowing a dragon is intelligent enough to speak is a small step compared to accepting that your lifelong adversaries are actually peaceful creatures being controlled by a demon the size of a mountain." I considered his comment in my head, realizing he had a pretty decent point. It really wasn't so much of a stretch compared to everything else, but I still had my doubts they'd handle it well.

"I guess you have a point, but I still think they're gonna have a hard time accepting the fact that you can talk." Toothless looked at me for a moment before nodding at my assumption. My eyes drifted from his back to the fire, noting the teens sitting around it. Every single one of them were staring at us, their mouths agape. I was trying my best to fight back the urge to burst into laughter as Tuffnut quietly stammered out a question.

"Wait. Did you just say... Toothless can... Did he just nod at you?" Tuffnut's amassment of incomplete questions led him to an apparent inability to speak. In the silence after hearing his name, Toothless let out a small grunt in response. Gathering the attention of Tuff and the others, he looked to them and shook his head in agreement. I heard Fishlegs whimper a little at the action as Tuff tried talking again. "...And he... Right." He turned his attention to Astrid, who was quietly choking back laughter beside me. "So, uh, am I losing it, or can Toothless actually talk to... Talk to... Talk..." The realization finally hitting him, Tuffnut went silent. He looked to me and stared for a moment before slowly lying on his back. Ruffnut and Snotlout had similar reactions, leaving only Fishlegs still staring at Toothless. He had a little notepad out and was scribbling away, moving so fast that it appeared he was trying to turn the entire page black. Astrid finally let out a laugh and turned to me.

"Congratulations, Hiccup. You actually managed to break our friends with one conversation." She kept giggling, the sound of which eventually goaded Toothless and I into laughing with her. Toothless's loud, low chuckle seemed to pull the others out of their collective daze, immediately causing Snotlout to jump to his feet, only to stumble back and fall over. The twins laughed at this, since childish physical humor tended to be their favorite kind of humor. Fishlegs, being the only one not distracted or tongue-tied, addressed the metaphoric(and physical) dragon in the room.

"Wait. T-Toothless... Understands Norse?" He glanced to the dragon in question. "And you can understand his dragon language? Hiccup, you've only been around him for a month... You're telling me you learned an **entire **language in thirty days?"

"Actually," interrupted Astrid, a smile on her face, "he learned Dragonese in two days." The look of shock on Fishlegs's face gave me a chance to slightly correct her statement.

"I had been noticing strange things for most of the month, really. There were times where Toothless and I would be alone and randomly I'd hear someone talking. I thought I was going insane until I figured out it was him I was hearing. After that realization the pieces just kinda fell into place." Fishlegs stared at me with an awestruck expression.

"An entire language in a month. Like I said, you have certainly

changed Viking history. First, dragons aren't actually evil, then the Red Death, and now this." He shook his head. "When they build the statue of the two of you in the town square, do you think I could be in it? I'd like to be remembered, even if I'll never be as legendary as you." I was taken aback by his statement. Legendary? I had previously thought that what I'd accomplished would be the thing of legends, but I never fully realized exactly what that meant. I shook my head and addressed Fishlegs.

"Fishlegs, you do realize that if this is successful and the decision to build a statue is made, it won't just be me, right?" He stared at me, not comprehending what I was trying to say. "I mean, Toothless and I won't be alone when we fight the Red Death. All of you will be there with us, if things go as planned." My explanation caught the attention of Snotlout and the twins, and with her usual sly grin Ruffnut spurted out a comment.

"So what you're saying is, we'll all have statues in the plaza?" She turned to Tuffnut, who was wearing a near-identical smile. "Hear that, squirrel-brain? That ugly mound of shit you call a face will be around to scare countless generations of kids." She grinned at him while he processed her comment.

"Oh _yes!_ This just keeps getting better! I love scaring kids- Hey, wait a minute." He turned his attention back to his sister. "SCREW YOU!" With a growl, he shoved Ruffnut into the dragon nip behind the two of them. Their wrestling was half-shrouded by grass, though from what I could tell Tuffnut had the upper hand for once. Still, though, we didn't have time for their shenanigans, so I tried to interrupt the tussle.

"Ruff, Tuff, could you two stop it for a second and let me finish? We might still be able to get a little sleep tonight if you just stopped for five minutes." They ignored me, rolling even further into the grass. I sighed, thinking about how I might end their fighting, when Toothless broke my concentration.

"_Hiccup, let them keep at it. I want to see who wins._" He let out another small chuckle. "_They're like two Terrors fighting over a half-eaten fish._" Thinking back to one of the days I'd witnessed that firsthand, I laughed at how accurate the description was. Astrid squeezed my hand to get my attention when she heard me laugh at Toothless's purring. I knew she wanted me to translate, as I'd been doing it for her all night.

"Toothless just said they look like two Terrors fighting over half a fish, that's all." Astrid laughed again as Fishlegs, surprisingly, stood up and walked over to the brawling siblings. With his large arms, he grabbed them both by their tunics, lifting them off the ground and away from each other.

"Look, you two can fight later. I still have some questions for Hiccup the, uh... The Legend." The twins went quiet in his grasp, and with a gesture Fishlegs tossed them back to their spots and sat back down himself. Smirking, I questioned the title Fishlegs had given me.

"Hiccup the Legend?" I pulled my hand from Astrid's momentarily and crossed my arms. "I can see what you're getting at, but it's not necessary. I'm fine with plain old 'Hiccup.'" I glanced from Fishlegs

to the twins, who I had noticed looked very eager to speak. The feeling that 'plain old Hiccup' wasn't fine with them crossed my mind as Ruffnut leaned closer to the fire.

"Oh no. Hiccup, you need a title. Your dad has one, and so have all of the other previous Chiefs of Berk." Tuff nodded next to her, chiming in himself.

"Well, 'Hiccup the Useless' is just plain wrong, so we can throw that one away. How about 'Hiccup the Dragon Rider'?" Ruff rolled her eyes.

"Oh come on, that title's so boring! 'Hiccup the Dragon King' is way better." I could sense their argument coming. With a sigh, I uncrossed my arms and let them fall to my sides.

"That's okay I guess, but 'Hiccup the Hero' flows off the tongue much better than 'Dragon King.'"

"Moron, Hiccup the second was called 'Hiccup the Hero.' You can't just take his title!"

"Fine. It's too plain, anyway. We should call him 'Hiccup the Dragonlord!'" I slowly glared at Tuffnut, deciding to interrupt their naming contest before it got any worse.

"Ruff, Tuff, just stop it. I don't want a title, and even if every Chief of Berk has to have one, I certainly don't need it now. Also, 'Hiccup the Dragon King?' The 'Dragonlord?' I wouldn't exactly say I Lord over anything, especially not dragons." Toothless crooned at me in agreement. "Besides, we've got more important things to focus on."

"You're damn right we do." Snotlout interrupted us, apparently tired of being unceremoniously quiet. "So you mean to tell me Toothless can understand us, and you can understand him. So, can only Night Furies talk, or can all..." He stopped, and suddenly his face went from irritated to angry. "Wait, that's how you did it! You've been cheating in Dragon Training since the beginning! You've really got so-" Toothless let out another growl at him, ending his tirade immediately. With Snotlout quiet, I nodded.

"Yes, actually. I've been rigging the training sessions with the help of the dragons in the ring. But I had to do it to keep you guys from hurting them or getting injured yourselves." Snotlout looked ready to argue again, but I held up a hand in hopes he'd listen to me for once. Surprisingly, he did. "I'm going to keep doing it, too. The only way I might be able to convince the village that dragons aren't what we think they are is if I gain their respect, and winning in Training is the best way to do it. It'll be a lot easier now that everyone's on the same page, too." I glanced around the group again, hoping none of them would be upset with my plans. Snotlout was the only one who looked like he wanted to say something, but thankfully he just grimaced and grunted in agreement.

"Alright. Uh, Hiccup... Could we try to wrap this up? I'm getting rather tired." Fishlegs spoke up again, asking me directly to get back on track. I obliged.

"Yeah, I think we could all do with at least a few hours of sleep,

even if Stormfly's already thought of a plan to give me another victory." I let out a small yawn before continuing.

"Now wait a minute," Snotlout interrupted, a frown on his face. "Who the Hel is Stormfly?" I shook my head and stifled another yawn.

"It's the name Astrid chose for the Nadder. You'll all get to choose a name for your dragons, but right now that's not important. Lets just finish this and worry about everything else when we come to it." Snotlout quieted down again, letting me finish what I'd been trying to say before being interrupted by at least five different topics. "Alright, a few answers that I'm sure you're all looking for: One, anyone can learn Dragonese, as far as I know. Two, don't expect to learn it nearly as quickly as I did. Three, don't ask how I did it, because I'm still not certain, myself. Four, all of the dragons in the kill ring can talk, even the Terror. Five, I'm using my private forge access to build another saddle for Toothless, and after I get their measurements I'll be making saddles for all of your dragons, as well. I'll be doing those at night because they won't take as long to make and I won't have time before my week ends to do them anyway. Oh, and my bet with Gobber was rigged from the beginning, since I was checking on where the scouting boat was with the help of Toothless." I took a deep breath and continued. "I'm pretty sure that's it. Unless any of you have other questions, we should get back to the village. It's already really late, and if we're not spotted in the plaza by a night guard soon, they'll probably get a search party out to look for us. Or me, at least, since you all know how my father can be if I'm missing for too long at night." A mumble of agreement went through the group and before long we were all standing to leave, my hand slipping from Astrid's once more as Toothless pulled his tail from us. I stretched out and finally released the yawn that had been sitting in the back of my throat as Toothless walked over to the fire. With a flick of his paw he stamped it out, grinding the glowing embers into the ground. I patted him on the side as I hopped into the saddle, Astrid jumping up with me. She addressed the others before Toothless and I took off.

"I'm gonna go with Hiccup back to the cove so he doesn't walk back into town by himself. Like he said, you know how the Chief can get when he's out at night alone." I suppressed another smile, resigning myself to silence as I clicked the control stirrup in place. "We'll see you in training tomorrow. Let's go, Hiccup." I grabbed the handles of the saddle as Astrid put her arms on my shoulders. Noticing we were secure, Toothless unfolded his wings and began beating them against the night breeze. The flight back to the cove was quick, and within a few minutes we had touched down. I went through our usual landing routine, and after finishing with Toothless's brush, Astrid and I bade him a farewell as we climbed out of the cove.

"Well, that could've ended very poorly, all things considered. It's a load off my mind, but at the same time I still have to figure out how we're going to get to the dragons in the kill ring without anyone noticing." The thought had been in the back of my mind since realizing we'd have to do it, but I still didn't have any idea how we could pull it off. We didn't just need the guard to leave, we needed the entire village to be ignorant of what we were doing. If one of the dragons were to roar, everyone would be alerted that something was wrong in the kill ring and they'd show up faster than we could

leave.

"We all have to find a solution to this. It isn't just you anymore." Astrid grabbed my hand again as she smiled at me. "Quit trying to do it all yourself and let the rest of us help. Or I'll punch you again." I smirked a little and glanced over to her.

"Why do I get the feeling you'll be punching me regardless?" I heard Astrid let out a small laugh before pulling her hand from mine and punching me on the arm. "Exactly. But I guess you have a point, Astrid. I'll try to keep it in mind." She punched me again before grabbing my hand, pulling me back to the village in silence.

* * *

><p>"HICCUP!" My eyes jerked open once more that morning. I glanced to my father, who was standing at the mouth of the ring. There was a very large, wooden maze set up in the kill ring, one I assumed we'd be 'training' in. "Wake up and pay attention! Now, as I was saying, Nadder quills are poisonous, but not poisonous enough to kill you. What you really need to be wary of is getting hit by a few dozen of them, since they're thrown in groups. However, the most important thing to avoid is the Nadder's fire. As you probably know, it's the hottest that we know of, and being caught by it means certain death." He turned and threw open the cage door. "Everyone, in. Gobber, I want you to stay out here and keep an eye on the beast after you let it out. I'll be going in with them." Gobber nodded, walking over to the chain dome that made up the ceiling of the kill ring as the rest of us armed ourselves and entered behind my father. "Today, we've set up a maze you'll have to navigate." He turned and shut the main gate behind us just as the sound of a Nadder's chirp filled the air. I didn't hear any spoken word, though, so I ignored it and focused on my father again. "The objective is to work as a team to drive the dragon back to its cage. I'll be up on top of the walls watching to make sure you aren't killed, but other than that, you're on your own." With that, my father grabbed onto a rope ladder hanging from the chain ceiling, quickly hoisting himself on top of the large wooden walls. For a man of his stature, he had a certain grace about the way he kept steady on the narrow pathway the walls would provide. "Good luck!" I heard him yell, just as he leapt out of sight. We made our way into the maze, and choosing a path at random, I stopped and turned to Fishlegs.<p>

"If we split up, it'll look like we're all trying to find her, which is what they want. Fishlegs, take this path and if you see Stormfly, make the fight believable but don't try to hurt her. She'll be doing the same thing." With a heavy, nervous breath, Fishlegs nodded and walked down the path. We kept moving, each teen taking a separate passage until only Astrid and I remained.

"So, did you intend on us splitting up too, or did you want some 'alone time' with me?" Every muscle in my body tensed when I heard how suggestive she sounded. I laughed nervously, hoping I might be able to stop her from taking the conversation to where I knew she'd be taking it.

"What? N-no, Astrid, that's, uh, not it... Not at all. I just wanted you to maybe get some more time in with Stormfly. And actually understand her." Astrid gave me the playful grin I was still getting used to seeing on her before shaking her head and turning down a

random path.

"Sure you did, Hiccup. And for the record, you look kinda cute when you're nervous." Her comment caused me to stumble, wide-eyed, to the floor. Quickly pulling myself back up, I turned a flustered eye to her form, now doubled over in laughter.

"Yeah yeah, real funny. Let's take advantage of Hiccup's emotions for a laugh." Despite being mildly irritated that she was laughing at me, I couldn't help but smile at her. She might have thought I was cute when I was nervous, but she was absolutely angelic when she laughed. I admired her for a moment before noticing an odd feeling of excitement creep up within me as my overloaded brain finally comprehended what she'd just said. As Astrid stopped laughing and we continued walking, I decided to bring the thought up to her. "So, you really do think I'm cute then?" A wide grin came to my face as I noticed Astrid's cheeks turn a light shade of pink and her eyes go wide. From her shock, I'd guessed she hadn't realized the admission she'd given while teasing me.

"Ye- I mean, N... Hiccup." She stopped moving for a second and sighed. "...Yes, you actually are kinda... Cute." Astrid shook her head, almost in disbelief of what she'd just told me. "But don't go repeating that. It still feels really weird to me, being... Girly." She glanced up, making sure neither Gobber nor my father had heard her. "Good, I don't see anyone looking down at us." Right as she spoke, we both heard a very odd grunt-chirp sound, and with a crunch the looming figure of Stormfly looked down at us.

"_Morning, you two! You look just as tired as those identical loudmouths, the ugly one and the timid giant."_ She jumped down and began walking towards us, causing Astrid and I to step back. Stormfly may have spoken jubilantly, but she certainly didn't look happy. The untranslatable growl she was giving over her speaking chirps sounded rather nasty, as well.

"YOU TWO, WHACHA THINKIN'?! GIT GOIN'!" I heard Gobber scream from the chains above us. Stormfly quickly turned to him, launching a barrage of needles where he was standing. Unknown to him, though, none of the quills were actually aimed at him or any path he could have taken while dodging. The sight was comforting; if Stormfly could miss so convincingly, we didn't have to worry about accidentally being hit.

"_Stupid Viking. Oh, not you two, of course. Now, I want you to turn and run. I'll toss some quills at you to make it look natural."_ I nodded quickly, grabbing Astrid's arm and flipping us both around. We ran around the corner, hearing four or five darts slamming into the wall just inches behind us in a near-perfect vertical line. Sprinting a little further, we turned down a few more random pathways before stopping. Astrid readjusted her shield and held it up a little, looking around nervously.

"Hiccup, Stormfly's not... Mad, or anything, is she?" The look on Astrid's face was one of worry, and for some reason I guessed it was more for the dragon than herself. With a reassuring hand on her shoulder, I dispelled her concerns.

"Stormfly's not mad, she's just a lot better at pretending to be than the Gronckle is. Her growl may have sounded angry, but the chirps I

was translating were actually pretty cheery. Probably because of you." Astrid slowly smiled, looking relieved. She shook her head and began walking back the way we came.

"I was wondering what was with those clicks she was letting off. Sounded completely different than her growl." She shouldered her axe and looked back at me. "Come on, let's get going. If we have to drive her back into her cage, we should probably do it now and get it over w-" Astrid stopped as a very loud chirp came from halfway across the maze.

"_Hiccup, take Astrid and keep moving! It'll look weird if you aren't trying to find me. You did tell me she was the toughest Viking of your age, so as far as the two warrior Vikings know she's eating this up right now._" I wondered how she knew we weren't moving as I motioned to the path Astrid was standing in front of. We started hurrying toward where I thought Stormfly was as I told Astrid what she had said.

"Since I know you'll ask, Stormfly was just telling us to get moving. Apparently her ears are so sensitive she could hear us stop. At least, that's what I'm guessing she did, unless she can look through walls and just hasn't told us yet." Astrid sniggered next to me as we turned another corner, running back into Ruffnut and Fishlegs. I heard Astrid suppress another laugh as we walked up to them; she must have been wondering the same things I was.

"Oh! Uh, Hey, you guys." Fishlegs looked a little nervous to see us. I tried not to smile as I waved to him. "Hiccup, uh, you did say Stormfly wasn't going to hurt us, right? Because she looked really unhappy to see me." Ruffnut laughed at him as we followed them to the spot where more unintelligible chirping was coming from.

"Yeah, I could hear you try to cover your mouth as you screamed and ran away from her. Real tough, you know that, Legs?" She elbowed him, giving him a grin that looked not unlike the one I wasn't used to seeing on Astrid.

"Ruff, please. I'm still getting used to all of... This. You can't really blame me for that reaction." She kept laughing at him as Snotlout came barreling around a corner, bounding off of Fishlegs and hitting the ground. He bounced up and immediately turned to me.

"Hiccup! I thought you said she wouldn't attack us!" He growled at me in as hushed a voice as his angry mood would allow. "The thing shot those damn needles at me!" Astrid gave him an angry glare and spat out a retort.

"That 'thing' is named Stormfly, and of course she attacked you, idiot, Hiccup said she'd make the fight convincing!" She looked him over, noticing his weapon gone and his shield slightly charred. "You threw your mace at her, didn't you?" If possible, Astrid became even angrier.

"Well yeah, but she dodged it. Then she tried setting me on fire." Astrid appeared ready to beat him with the flat of her axe, which she was now holding in an attack position.

"Which you would've deserved for throwing a mace at _my dragon!_"

Astrid wasn't screaming, but she wasn't being very quiet. I glanced up, not noticing Gobber or my father. "Hiccup, let's get going. If I stay here I can't promise that Snotlout won't suddenly lapse into unconsciousness." She grabbed my arm, pulling me toward the sound of Stormfly chirping away in the distance. The others followed us, Snotlout keeping a fair distance back. Turning another few corners, we found Tuffnut heading down a random hallway. I gave a whistle, causing him to double back on us.

"Change of plans, I take it?" I nodded to him, still listening for more chirps. Eventually I stopped trying; I knew it wasn't necessary, since Stormfly would be coming to look for us when she was ready. "Man, Astrid, good call with Stormfly." Tuff's voice brought me back to the group rather than the situation we were in. He motioned his head back toward where he'd come from before continuing in a hushed voice. "She's smart, and damn is she accurate. The only shots that didn't miss me nailed every skull on my shield directly." He pointed to the four decorative flaming skulls painted on the shield, each with a quill protruding from their foreheads. With a grin, he turned to me. "I never should've had a bit of doubt in you about her." He cackled quietly before continuing his thought. "You have no idea how excited I am to live in a world where I can fly on a friggin' _dragon._" He laughed again, stopping mid-huff as a very loud 'thump' indicated Stormfly had just landed behind us.

"_Hi! It's time to start running. Hiccup, take them down the next left turn you can make, and then follow that to the ring wall. You'll be right by my cage."_ With that, she squawked angrily and shot a stream of fire just over our heads. I started running and turned down the path Stormfly had dictated to me, the others (and Stormfly) hot on my tail. Halfway to the stone wall, I glanced back to find Astrid still right behind me, but the others were a ways back. Stormfly was hopping along above them, firing missed shot after missed shot, sometimes using exposed shields as target practice. Though quite rushed, none of them seemed afraid of their predicaments, and within a few more moments we were all near the rock wall. She fluttered over us, landing off in front of her open cage. "_Alright! Lets finish this."_ She fired a quill at Snotlout, hitting the center of his charred shield with such a force that the wood splintered off of it. She fired a few more at our weapons, knocking them all across the stone floor. Astrid stood in awe of Stormfly's deadly accuracy even as her own axe was ripped from her hands. Completely disarmed, Stormfly began charging the group.

"SCATTER!" I screamed out to the others, and immediately we all started moving. The rest of them darted away down random paths as Stormfly approached, though as I'd figured, she was only after me.

"_Get around me and stand in front of my cage, then dodge. I'll do the rest."_ Her voice cut through my focus, stopping me in my tracks and pulling me completely around to look at her. I waited for her to get close before I leapt out of the way, pulling myself to my feet and running back from where I'd came.

"HICCUP!" I heard my father scream, though the sound was drowned out by the sound of Stormfly leaping from the perch she had taken atop the wooden maze wall, causing it to fall over, knocking down a few other walls in the process. I stopped in front of her cage as she told me to, leaping out of the way yet again as she quickly sped past

me and collided with the back of her enclosure.

"_Ooh, too fast."_ She shook her head a few times, looking a bit dazed. She glanced at me, and with a happy chirp she pulled her doors shut, which I proceeded to lock with the nearby lever. "_Well, I think they'll buy that, even if I did shut my own cage in front of the Beas-"_ She stopped mid-sentence, apparently realizing the connection between the Chief and I. "_I'm sorry, Hiccup, that's your... Father, is it? I apologize for the name, but I hope you can see it from my perspective. I am the one locked in a cage, after all."_ I leaned closer to the door, glancing back to see my father slowly walking over to me, a confused look on his face.

"Don't worry about it, Stormfly. Get some sleep and I'll see you later. Maybe even sooner than later, since the other students know the truth now." I quickly whispered the message to her, hearing another chirp as my father put his hand on my shoulder. I locked up, hoping he hadn't heard anything I'd just said.

"Good job, Hiccup. I didn't realize you were trying to trick it into running back into its own cage. Smart thinking." He used the hand on my shoulder to steer me towards the downed wall. "Come on, the exit's over this way. The others are probably on their way there now." We started walking as another chirp came from Stormfly's cage. My father actually stopped and looked at her door as I translated what she was saying in my head.

"_Tell Astrid I'm looking forward to our real training sessions."_ I whispered the words 'I will' under my breath, making a note in my head to give the message to Astrid when we were in the forge this afternoon. I was hoping Stormfly's acute hearing would pick up my response as she let out a positive chirp, loud enough that my father seemed knocked out of whatever trance the dragon's apparent erratic behavior had put him in.

"What's gotten into the damn thing?" He grunted in confusion as he turned to me. "Hiccup, what were you doing, talking in front of the Nadder's door, anyway?" I froze for a moment, but then pulled myself back together as a decent answer came to mind.

"Oh, I was just thanking Odin and Thor and every other god I could think of over and over again for that stupid idea working nearly as well as it did. If it hadn't I'd be a pile of ashes right now." My father gave me an uncertain look before shaking his head and chuckling.

"I can understand that. I did something similar right after my match with the Nightmare." He pulled his hand from my shoulder as we reached the exit, meeting up with Gobber and the others. "Trainees! That concludes the opening portion of dragon training. You're free to go and do as you like for the rest of today and tomorrow. On Moon's Day we start with the main course, so prepare yourselves." He turned to Gobber, who began walking back to town with him.

"So, Meade Hall then, Stoick? I think it's time for a lil' rematch in that 'Chess' game ya picked up from Johann. I'll win this time, an' ya know it." My father laughed at him as they walked away, the rest of their conversation unintelligible. We followed them back into town, falling behind enough for them not to hear anything we might talk about. Once we were a comfortable distance away from them,

Fishlegs addressed me.

"Alright... Hiccup, what are we doing today?" I had a feeling he still wanted to interrogate me about Dragonese, but I had an entire day of alone time in the forge considering Gobber rarely worked on Washing Day.

"There's really not much for us to do in a group. Besides, I'm gonna be spending the rest of my day in the smithy working on the tailfin and saddle. After all, the bet's going to expire in a few days, so I have to make the best of it." Fishlegs silently agreed with me as we began walking up to the building in question. As we reached the door, I turned to the twins. "Ruff, Tuff, I'd appreciate it if you start working on ways to get the guard-"

"Hiccup," Tuff interrupted me, "don't worry about it. Ruff and I can take it from here, trust us. Just get in that forge and finish working already so you have more time to spend getting _our_ saddles done." He turned to his sister. "Let's go. I just had a good idea, and it involves taking some time out to piss off Mildew." She grinned in return.

"Ooh, we haven't done that in a while. Wanna steal his walking stick again? Then push him down some stairs and hide his sheep in the barn?" Tuff started laughing as they walked off, deep in conversation about what they'd be doing to Berk's oldest and most annoying inhabitant. I lightly chuckled at them as I walked into the forge, Astrid right behind me. Snotlout mumbled something and stalked off, and after a polite farewell Fishlegs left for his house. I threw the cloth over the entrance, pulled off my bearskin and got back to work.

* * *

><p>Astrid and I skipped lunch in the Meade Hall so I could get in as much time as possible working before we both left for the cove. The tailfin was done, and after getting into a decent rhythm, the saddle was coming along at a much faster pace than I'd originally expected. I was nearly a quarter of the way through with it, and considering how quickly the work had gone by I was guessing I would be finished it in another day or two. With that thought in my mind, I pulled the shimmering quarter-saddle from the fire, waited for the scales to 'dry' and carefully hid it away in my workshop with the completed fin. I began wiping the sweat from my brow with a work rag(making sure it wasn't underwear before bringing it anywhere near my face) as Astrid and I walked out through the now uncovered smithy door. Once out into the cold midday air of Berk, I basked in the chilling breeze for a moment before throwing my bearskin back on. I adjusted it a little as Astrid spoke to me.<p>

"I think I'm gonna swing by the bathhouse and clean up before we go flying. You really build up a sweat in there even when you're not doing anything." I agreed in silence as I ran the rag through my hair a few times, throwing it through the service window into a bucket when I was done.

"Yeah. Now imagine how much worse it gets when you're standing directly over white hot coals and trying hard to focus on the tedious job you're doing while the girl on the bench spends most of the afternoon trying to make you nervous because she thinks it's 'cute.'"

Astrid punched me on the arm for reminding her of that word.

"Really funny, Hiccup. I'll meet you at the cove when I'm done bathing." I nodded, and with a temporary farewell we went our separate ways. As I made my way to the forest, though, I heard my name being called in double. Turning to the source of the sound, I was greeted by Tuff nearly tackling me to the ground before dodging me at the last second. He stumbled and hit the floor himself, immediately leaping to his feet to look me in the eye.

"Sorry about that, Hiccup. Force of habit. Anyway, Ruff and I have some news." Tuffnut gathered himself to continue, but his sister cut him off(as she often did).

"Yeah! We've got a plan to-"

"Don't interrupt me! I was gonna tell him." I could see a fight brewing between them both again, but I didn't have the time to put up with it.

"Guys, could you please skip the part where you attack each other and get to the point already? I still have things to do." I tapped my foot impatiently as I waited for the two of them to settle down. They shot one another angry glares before Ruff sighed and gestured to me, silently telling her brother to continue. With his token grin, he did so.

"Alright, so, you know how you made a bet with Gobber to get the forge, knowing you'd win against him? Well, Ruff and I just made a bet against our parents knowing full well we won't win." He looked pleased and triumphant with his statement, but I couldn't understand why.

"Okay, but why would you be bragging about starting a bet you know you'll lose?" I raised an eyebrow in bewilderment as I waited for a response. It came in the form of Ruffnut pushing her brother to the floor with a grin before answering me.

"That's easy. We bet our parents that we'd be nice to each other for a week, starting today. If we win, they'll never complain about us fighting again. But if we lose, Tuff and I will be forced to take our father's overnight shift 'guarding' the dragon ring for the next month. It's perfect." My eyes went wide as what she said registered with me. I was about to thank them both profusely for the help when Tuff grabbed his sister's ankles and pulled her to the ground, using her face as leverage to stand up.

"Don't thank us yet, though. Guarding the ring isn't a serious job, but it's still considered a lot for untrained teenagers to handle. They have to okay it with Stoick first, but I doubt he'll have a problem with it. After all, the ring's been around for two hundred and fifty years and only one dragon's ever gotten out, or so my dad says. Not to mention it only escaped because its door was too weak to hold it." Tuffnut finished his explanation as he quickly ducked down and pulled his sister to her feet, effectively stopping her from copying his takedown technique. "Anyway, we're gonna let the others know what's going on, and once that bet is in place we'll have a clear way to the training grounds. You'd better be ready for a lot of sleepless nights, Hiccup." I could tell from the anticipation evident on their faces that they were looking forward to this more than any

of the others were. I grinned even wider and gave them both a nod.

"Alright. Go tell Fishlegs and Snotlout. I'll let Astrid know, since I'll be seeing her in a little while. And even though you told me not to say it, thank you. It's a huge weight from my shoulders." The twins nodded to me before heading off to bring Lout and Legs up to speed. Surprisingly, neither of them made to attack one another at all as they left for the town plaza. I assumed it was to make their bet seem more authentic as I slipped away into the brush behind me.

* * *

><p>"Alright, are you ready? Remember, Toothless is right here. He'll catch you." Astrid nodded to me slowly as her nervous eyes glanced down again to the ocean far below us. Her pale-faced complexion stood as an obvious sign that she was deathly afraid of what we were about to do, but I knew how she was. Regardless of how terrified she might be, she wouldn't back away from something like this.<p>

"Yeah, let's... Let's just do this. If you give me time to think about it I'll never go through with it." Astrid slowly pulled her arms from me, pulling a leg back over the saddle so she was sitting facing to the left. I locked Toothless's tailfin in place and did the same.

"Alright, whenever you're ready." She nodded slowly, grabbing my hand as she scooted to the edge of the riding tack. Toothless was watching us, and could easily tell how nervous she was.

"_Once she starts falling she'll be fine. Anyway, enjoy the trip, you two."_ Before I could tell him to let Astrid go at her own pace, he rolled, bucking both of us into a freefall. Astrid started crushing my hand in hers as we fell, though surprisingly she was silent. After a few moments, in fact, she seemed more than a little relaxed and let go of my hand. We stayed like that for a little while, freefalling with one another; I did a few flips that Astrid mimed, speaking some words I couldn't hear as she spun through the air. Toothless was falling beside us, laughing at Astrid as she slowly adjusted to the strange sensation of plummeting through the clouds. After several minutes of our airborne acrobatics, we approached the bubbling ocean currents below. Toothless spun over to us and took a position that allowed both Astrid and I to easily reconnect with him before he opened his massive wings and pulled us out of the dive. We leveled out and then shot back up, soaring through the clouds and coming to a stop far above the mist of Helheim's Gate. As we slowed back down to speeds more fitting to holding a conversation, I could hear Astrid letting off an exhilarated laugh.

"Gods, Hiccup, that was _amazing!_ I don't think I've ever felt so free before. It's really something else when you're up here." She wrapped her arms back around me, putting her head on my shoulder. "Do you think we might be able to go again? Like, a few dozen times?" I grinned and nodded, making to pull Toothless back up so we could go for a second run. However, he apparently had other plans.

"_Hiccup, stop. Listen to the Gate. Do you hear that?_" I leaned forward and turned an ear to Helheim's Gate, listening carefully for anything. Whatever voices or sounds Toothless was hearing, though,

were well out of the range of my listening capabilities.

"I'm not hearing anything, bud. What is it?" The look on Toothless's face was one of caution and worry, and it began effecting me, as well. His earflaps were twitching like mad, trying to pick up whatever sounds he was claiming were coming from the Gate. "Well, do you hear anything I should know about?"

"_Yes."_ he quickly interjected. "_It's the Red Death. She's letting off a mating call, Hiccup. It'll gather all of the dragons that haven't yet come back to the nest, and once that's done happening she'll most likely send them back out to gather more food for the coming winter months."_ His words cut through me like a knife as the realization finally struck. With a flick of my ankle, we turned and sped back to the cove. Astrid clamped down harder and whispered a question directly into my ear.

"Hiccup, what's going on? What's gotten Toothless so spooked?" The inflection in her voice told me she was as close to as nervous as I was. With an anxious sigh, I turned my head to her and answered her question, even if I'd rather not burden her with the knowledge.

"The Red Death is calling the dragons back home. Once they get there, she'll most likely send them out again. Astrid, we're probably not that far away from another raid." Her grip around me became viselike as we sped off toward Berk. I couldn't figure out how I could warn everyone without blowing my secrets, but at the same time I couldn't keep quiet, either. If I did, I'd be willingly letting more people from my own village die unnecessarily.

14. Welcome to Dragon Taming

****A/N:**_ Welcome back! This chapter took me a while, so I apologize for that. Hopefully you'll like it as much as the previous chapters; I certainly do._**

I'm hoping the next chapter won't take nearly as long to complete as this one did, though now that I actually have an outline to work with, it shouldn't. I would not suggest writing a story blind. It's very difficult to make it flow well when you're making everything up on the spot. But I digress. Let's see how the first night of dragon 'taming' goes.

_Enjoy.
>

* * *

><p>We'd made it back to the village from Toothless Cove in record time. As I'd asked her to, Astrid headed off to gather the others while I returned to the forge to continue working. I was just pumping the bellows as she led the group in, directing them to the workbench she normally sat on while I began toiling away over the coals. I stayed silent, focusing as much as I could on finishing the tack while Astrid broke the news to them. They didn't handle it nearly as well as either of us had, and Toothless's assurance that we'd have a few days at least to prepare did nothing to raise their hopes. Despite that, I put down my work and turned to address everyone.<p>

"Look, I know this probably seems like a lot for us to handle, but considering our ultimate goal it really isn't that bad. I mean, it's bad, don't get me wrong. But it's not as hopeless as you're probably thinking." I tried not to look as uncertain as I felt, though I had my doubts it was working. "We've got a few days to prepare for this, probably, and that means a few days to figure out how we're going to--"

"Hiccup," Snotlout interrupted me, "what do you think six teenagers can do about this? None of us are ready to fight off a raid. What we should be doing is warning the village so everyone can get ready!" With that, he leaned up from the wall he'd been resting against and turned to head for the door. Astrid cleared her throat and shot him a dirty look, grabbing her axe's handle in the process. He stopped immediately, apparently realizing she wouldn't hesitate to use it on him if he tried to leave. With a frustrated growl, he slumped back against the wall of the smithy, all the while staring daggers at me. I tried my best to ignore him and continued on.

"We have to approach this situation at a different angle. Trying to explain everything as it is to anyone in the village will probably just complicate things, not to mention raise a lot of questions as to how a group of teenagers predicted a dragon attack when ten previous generations of Vikings couldn't." I was sneered at yet again as Snotlout attempted to shut down what I was saying.

"Complicate? Moron, if we tell them about this they can hide the animals before it happens!" I stared at him for a moment before sighing to myself.

"Yeah, and then the dragons knock down every building in the village until they find what they're looking for. Normal Viking tactics aren't going to work here, especially for the six of us, so we're going to have to do something different. I'm thinking that if we can give the dragons what they're looking for, they'll leave the village faster and we'll have a lot less cleaning up to do. So, either we let them take half of our supplies for the winter months or we start gathering food now so we have enough to cover the both of us." I turned back to the forge when I was finished, determined to complete my work. I had a feeling I'd be needing better, fireproof riding equipment for what was awaiting us in the days ahead. As I heated the coals back up I noticed a small whining sound coming from the floor where Fishlegs was seated.

"Uh, Hiccup, I'm not trying to accuse you or anything, but are you implying we... Let them take our food? Isn't that kinda bad?" I glanced over to him across the hearth, wiping some sweat from my brow before addressing the question.

"Fishlegs, I'm implying we help them raid us." I could see the look of near-mortification of the faces of everyone in the smithy, but I powered on despite it. "I know it sounds crazy, but like I said, they never end a raid without taking what they need. We'll have to make up for the animals they do take, but it's not like we have any other options right now. That is, unless we can come up with something else." I turned my attention back to the saddle again, using a bit of pressure to meld some particularly difficult scales when Astrid's voice yanked yet again at my concentration.

"Hiccup, I understand what you're trying to do, but if we don't at least try to defend our supplies half the village is going to starve to death over the winter. We can't just let them take what they want!" For the first time in days, she seemed genuinely upset with me. I'd always hated seeing her angry or let down, but now wasn't the time to worry about it.

"Except we are going to just let them take what they want. We don't have a chance to stop them ourselves, but we can use their strength to replenish what we lose. Or did you forget that I'd intended to eventually take the dragons out of the kill ring?" Five sets of eyes locked on to me as they began realizing what I was talking about. "I'm not sure it'll be enough to make up for our losses, but we're going to be short on food this winter regardless. We might as well use the dragons to our advantage." I continued working on the saddle while splitting my brain in two over the idea of saying something to my father. On one hand, not telling him could end horribly for the village, but on the other hand, telling him could end horribly for me. I had a feeling he was skeptical of my unexplained victories in the ring, and the last thing I wanted to do was give him any more reasons to be suspicious of me. My mind continued with this tug-of-war, stopping only as Snotlout piped up again. He was considerably calmer, though, and with a closer look I could see him eyeing Astrid's weapon of choice.

"Hey, why don't we just tell the village we saw a bunch of dragons flying to Helheim's Gate? Wouldn't that work?" The suggestion was simple and straightforward, which was probably why I hadn't considered it. Yet again I stopped working, only this time it would hopefully be the last interruption I'd face.

"Actually... That might not be a bad idea. If someone tells my father that they saw a flock of dragons flying past Berk, he'll raise an alarm to be on guard, but he probably won't touch any of the livestock. I doubt he'd think much of it, either, as long as it isn't me who tells him. All we'd have to worry about at that point is getting the raiding dragons to leave." I fell into a moment of silence yet again, this time trying to cobble together a strategy when Tuffnut broke my concentration. Despite a mild irritation at being interrupted once more, I listened to him.

"Well, if that's the plan I guess Ruff and I can handle it. We've got a bet to lose, and after that we can tell Stoick about the dragons." He stood up from the bench with his sister, giving a stretch as Astrid turned to them.

"So Stoick was okay with the terms of your bet, I take it?" Regardless of the tension that had been mounting in the room, some smiles began to emerge. Not even the threat of a raid hanging over us was enough to cut through the excitement of bonding with dragons rather than maiming them.

"Yes he was!" Ruffnut exclaimed. Her usual mischievous smile had returned in full force as she shoved her brother to the floor. "Everybody was laughing about it, too. They kept acting like we were about to get screwed over for a month because there's no way we'll win this bet."

"Damn straight." Tuff popped up from the floor as he spoke and shoved his sister through the cloth-covered doorway. The sound of her

tripping over some buckets and hitting the ground entered the smithy, followed by a few choice curses. With a bit of a hop in his step, Tuffnut made for the source of the sounds just outside. He stopped halfway to the door and turned to us to finish his thought. "We'll go get our 'punishments' now. Chief said that if we can't make it a day, we'll have to stand guard every night we're not training, starting tonight. So that's good." Ruff walked back in as her brother finished speaking, all the while staring angrily at the back of his head.

"Yeah, let's go finish this in the presence of witnesses. I'll be sure to make it believable." With a stiff arm she reached out and grabbed a handful of Tuffnut's hair, yanking him through the cloth. Their bickering and fighting made its way out of earshot as Snotlout grunted and looked at me.

"So what the Hel are we supposed to do? It's too damn hot in here to stay and I don't have anything else to do today." I glanced from Snotlout over to Fishlegs, who I noticed looked just as uncomfortable in the immense heat.

"So, I take it one time in here is enough for the both of you?" I chuckled lightly to myself, finding a bit of humor in knowing that 'weak little Hiccup' as I'd been known could handle the forge's heat better than the other teens. "Well, we're going to need a basket of fish for the actual taming process, so I'd appreciate it if one of you two could gather some. And remember: no eels. Other than that, you're probably best off finding a quiet, secluded place and grabbing a bit of sleep. I'm sure the twins will do the same, assuming they can after-" I was stopped by a commotion coming through the door. From the sound of my father's angry voice, the twins had lost their bet spectacularly. "After that." Snotlout gave me another glare before pushing off of the wall he'd been leaning on and walking out the door. Fishlegs followed him, looking more unsure of than upset with my plan. I continued working after they left, all the while hoping things would start looking up once we began taming the dragons.

"Do you think it'll be enough?" Astrid's question mimed what was going on in my own head while I worked on the saddle.

"Astrid, I really don't think we have a choice." I glanced away from the forge again, locking eyes with the girl in front of me. "If my father finds out what's really going on now, we're all dead. The best we can do is hope he takes the twins' warning seriously enough to prepare for-"

"HICCUP!" My father's voice rang out through the walls from the village square. With a startled jump I quickly gathered the supplies and hid them in my workshop while Astrid tried her best to clean the messy state the workbench had been left in from the others sitting on it. I hurried back into the main forge area to help with the cleanup when my father's voice came from just behind the cloth hanging over the entrance. "Hiccup, You're done with the forge for the day! Gobber's got a bunch of emergency repairs that need to get done now. You've earned some rest before Dragon Training really begins and I want to see you enjoying it. Now clean up and get moving." The sound of his heavy footfalls leaving the smithy area eventually faded as Astrid and I finished tidying up what was left of the mess the others had made. I hadn't had the quilt down from in front of the forge

entrance for a few seconds before Gobber walked up pulling a cart filled with bent, broken and otherwise damaged weaponry.

"Ah, Hiccup. Looks like Stoick already toldja I've got work ta do. An' there's a lot of it, too, so you an' Astrid needta get outta my way for the evenin'. Go on, shoo. Ya need yer rest fer the big boys." He directed both of us to the exit before quickly returning to the weapons cart. Astrid and I left, deciding to head for the cove for another round in the air with Toothless after realizing we didn't have much else to do. Our walk through the brush was silent until we were far enough away from the village to be sure no one could hear anything we'd say. Once out of earshot, Astrid turned to me.

"So, what exactly is the plan for all of this? Or do we even have one?" I scratched my head in response. I didn't really have any idea of what the others could do during the raid, but I knew what Id' be doing. "...Well?"

"To be honest, I don't know what the rest of you will be doing. As for me, though... I'll be in the air. After all, it's the only place I'll be useful." I almost expected her to be mad at me for the comment, but instead she just nodded in agreement.

"I had a feeling you'd say that. But then again, it's where you belong, so I can't blame you." She gave me a slight smile and tugged on my sleeve. "But maybe we shouldn't think about that right now. We can strategize as a group later on. For now let's keep our minds off things." I didn't have any time to respond before she pulled me into a run toward the front entrance to the cove.

* * *

><p>Compared to the time we spent in the air earlier, our second flight of the day was relatively uneventful; Toothless still didn't have any new information on the raid, and after the jarring interruption earlier Astrid didn't quite feel up to any more freefalling. We decided instead to coast gently through the clouds while the sun set below the horizon, both of us watching in awe at the spectacle of nature. I tried drawing the scene once again in my journal, but the combination of stirring winds and Astrid's constant questions about my artistic skills kept me from giving it the detail I wanted to. I gave up entirely once the sun had set, stuffing my journal into its harness as we soared above the twinkling lights of Berk. After admiring the sight for a little while longer, we swooped down for a landing in the cove. After giving Toothless a quick scrub with the wire brush, Astrid and I headed over to the Kill Ring to wait for the others. We arrived to see an already gathered group of teenagers just outside of the entrance gate, all eagerly awaiting our first taming session. Even Snotlout, despite holding a basket of foul-smelling fish, seemed excited to get started. Before we finally entered the ring, though, I took a quick look around to make sure we were indeed alone. Satisfied that no one was watching, I addressed the group.<p>

"Alright. Now, I've never taught anything before, but it can't be that difficult, so let's get into the ring. But first... Ruff, Tuff, are you sure no one's going to come check on us?" Despite the lack of prying eyes, I was still wary that someone from the village would wander over at some point to make sure the twins were doing their jobs properly. Even with the forewarning the dragons could give me, I

was afraid it might not give us enough time to escape unnoticed. From the identical grins on the twins' faces, though, I had a feeling my concerns were unnecessary.

"Don't worry about it," started Ruffnut. "The Chief kept going on about how us being out of the village's hair for a month is going to be a good thing. I don't think anyone would willingly come over here unless they thought we were in danger. Score to us for being annoyances." The two of them head butted each other as Fishlegs made to pull the lever of the kill ring gate. The sound of the rising chains clanking away seemed louder than normal, but once the gate was fully open my ears were met with nothing but silence. With a sigh of relief, I led the others down the walkway to the interior gate, which Fishlegs opened by hand with a bit of help from the twins. Once we were all inside, they lowered the gate and caught up with the rest of us, now close to Stormfly's cage door. Before I started our first lesson, I couldn't help but notice that the arena was completely silent save for the soft growl of anticipation coming from within Stormfly's enclosure. I had a distinct feeling the other dragons were listening to every word we said, waiting as patiently as they could for their turn. With that thought in mind, I decided to begin.

"Welcome to Dragon Taming. For lesson one we're going to do a little bit of bonding, and we'll start with Stormfly. Everyone step back and give Astrid some room. Snotlout, leave the fish here." Snotlout dropped the fish basket at my feet and joined the others in doing as I'd asked. With the four of them in the center of the arena and out of the way, I opened the basket for Astrid and made my way to the wall switch that would unlock Stormfly's enclosure.

"I'm ready." Before I could say anything, Astrid had a large cod in her hand and was staring down the door. I nodded and pressed down the lever, actuating the locking mechanism and popping the door open a little. Stormfly's snout popped out first, taking a quick huff of the air before pushing the door open all the way. Her growl was beginning to sound more and more like a purr as her eyes finally met with Astrid's. Without much in the way of caution, she walked right up to the confident Viking girl and carefully grabbed the fish from her hands before eviscerating it in one bite. With a lick of her lip, Stormfly leaned down to look Astrid straight in the eyes before offering her snout to the girl and crooning. Without a word, Astrid brought her hand to the dragon's head and began scratching her just under the jaw, to which Stormfly responded with some happy chirps. Astrid laughed along with her, apparently still in awe of her actions. The pair seemed so natural together that I momentarily forgot I was supposed to be teaching the others about bonding.

"_Hiccup, go let the other dragons out. Astrid and I are going to be fine. Besides, they're just as excited as the lot of you are, and I don't know how much longer they'll stay quiet."_ Stormfly's message ended with a simultaneous grunt of agreement from every other dragon cage, signaling to me to get on with letting them all out. I left the two of them alone and walked over to the Gronckle's cage, gesturing Fishlegs to follow me. With quite a bit of hesitation, he did so.

"Suddenly I'm not so sure about doing this, Hiccup." I gave him a blank stare before pointing to Astrid, who was currently sitting on

top of Stormfly and scratching away at her neck. Fishlegs looked from the two of them to me, apparently trying very hard to find an excuse to back out of this. "Well, that's- That's not- The Gronckle might not-"

"Fishlegs," I said, stopping him mid-rant, "Calm down. It'll be fine." I threw him a fish and grabbed the handle to the cage, where I waited for a signal from him. He was shaking slightly and pale in the face, but despite that Fishlegs slowly nodded for me to open the door. With a loud click, the lock released and the Gronckle slowly pushed the door open with her massive head. She let out a happy growl when she saw Fishlegs and even had to stifle a laugh at the spectacle that was Astrid and Stormfly.

"_Took you long enough. That cage can get really cramped._" Her eyes swiveled from me back over to her prospective rider, and with a grunt she began walking toward him. "_So this is who you've paired me up with? I can't say I have a problem with it. Those twins are too obnoxious and I don't care for the other one's attitude much._"

"Hiccup, that... Sounded like a growl. Maybe this isn't such a-" Once again he stopped mid-sentence, silenced by the Gronckle grunting at him once more. He stood there, pale-faced as ever, but remained still enough to slowly raise the fish up as an offering. It seemed as though that was all he could will himself to do, considering the circumstances. Cautiously, the Gronckle moved forward and took the fish from him. I kept watching as Fishlegs put his hand up to the rock-like dragon as a final peace offering. After a few tense seconds she let out a purr of approval and pressed her head to his hand, much like Toothless had done with me.

"See, Fishlegs? That wasn't so hard." He gave a nod to my statement but refused to take his eyes off of the dragon he was now petting. He was apparently awestruck with the situation, too overcome to say or do anything more than stand there and blankly pet the Gronckle's snout. She seemed very calm, though, so I felt confident that I could leave them be. I turned to look for the twins, only to first see Snotlout standing alone near the gate of the arena. I tried to gesture him over instead, but rather than listen to me once more that night, he decided instead to ignore my gesture. With a sigh I pushed his stubbornness out of my mind and focused again on the twins, who were both already over by the Zippleback's cage with a few fish in each of their hands. Grabbing the handle with his teeth, Tuff unlatched the Zippleback's door and jumped back near his sister. The massive dragon quickly popped the doors to her enclosure open and ambled out into the night air. Four sets of eyes stared the twins down, apparently waiting for them to make the first move. Unafraid, the twins both offered up their fish to a separate head and waited impatiently for them to respond. Both heads quickly snapped up the fish, only to lean back down and open their mouths in wait for more of the same. With some loud laughing they continued feeding the dragons.

"This is everything my five-year-old self ever dreamed it would be." Tuff gave another laugh as he approached his dragon head, giving it a rough tackle and scratch down. The head was caught by surprise, letting out a spark in reply to Tuff's actions. Despite the roughhousing, the Zippleback seemed unbothered by the twins. "Cool, it's the sparking one. Hey Ruff, my dragon's cooler than your

dragon." I shook my head and let out a sigh at Tuff's comment. Not this again.

"Idiot, they're the SAME dragon."

"_Yes, but also, no."_

"Then why does it have two heads?"

"_Technically, we're hive-minded, much like a colony of bees-"_

"Who cares? It only has ONE body!"

"_Do they do this a lot?"_

"But two heads mean two brains, and that means two dragons."

"You don't have ANY brains, but you're still only one person!"

"_This is getting tiring."_

"HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE TWO BLACK E- HEY!" To my surprise and amusement, both of the Zippleback's heads simultaneously grabbed the two Vikings and held them both upside down from their legs. Stifling a laugh, I approached the three(four?) of them.

"Looks like the Zippleback knows what it's doing. You two need to stay quiet, and stop arguing for once. You're here to bond, not bicker." The twins were replaced on the ground before the Zippleback's heads nodded in unison, agreeing to what I'd said. Once more they stared the twins down, only this time it was for them to quietly start attempting to build trust. Satisfied, I walked over to Snotlout.

"What are you looking at?" Snotlout's attempt at anger wasn't very convincing, and it was becoming clearer and clearer that he was even more afraid of meeting his dragon than Fishlegs was. Then again, it wasn't unexpected, since he'd be bonding with the largest dragon to frequent the skies of Berk.

"Snotlout, this isn't the time to have second thoughts. Besides, once you get this over with you'll be wondering why you were so afraid to do it in the first place. Now come on." I tried once more to persuade him to follow me, but again he refused. I slapped a hand to my head in exasperation when a memory I had resurfaced. "Look, we can either do this the easy way, or I can have the twins throw you into the Nightmare's cage. Your choice." Perfectly on cue like actors in a play, Ruff and Tuff appeared with their dragon in tow. Snotlout tried to scoot a bit away from them only to be stopped by the sound of a Nadder growling at his backside. Standing frozen in place, he finally crumbled.

"FINE! Fine, I'll do it. Not like I have a choice, anyway." He stomped off to the largest gate in the arena, though still keeping a bit of distance from Fishlegs and his Gronckle, who were now both lying on the cold stone floor. The others went back to what they were doing while I grabbed the half empty fish basket and dragged it over to Snotlout, who took a handful of mackerel and waited for me to open the Nightmare's door. With a click the lock disengaged, but the doors

remained shut. Curious as to what was keeping her, I approached the enclosure and began pulling one of the doors open. From the small gap that appeared came the Nightmare's commanding voice.

"_Tell the one you're pairing me with to open the doors himself. I won't be ridden by a coward."_ I fought back a smile as I returned to where Snotlout was standing. Knowing him, he wouldn't take kindly to being called a coward, even if the one saying it was a dragon.

"Looks like you're on your own with this one. The Nightmare told me she wants you to open those doors. Apparently she won't let a coward be her rider." I laughed a bit as Snotlout's face changed to a bright shade of red. Surprisingly, he ignored me, instead choosing to address the Nightmare personally.

"Oh, so I'm a coward, am I? Let's see how cowardly you think I am now!" With that, he ran to the Nightmare's enclosure and yanked open the heavy steel doors as best he could. The moment the gap between them was wider than the Nightmare's head, however, she popped it out, grabbed Snotlout and pulled him into the cage, fish and all. Her tail snaked out into the arena and pulled the doors shut with a quiet thump.

"_The boy will be fine. I'm just toying with him."_ I heard her reassurance over Snotlout's nonsensical ramblings and immediately cracked a smile. I never imagined the dragon would actually hurt Snotlout, since it was essentially a death sentence, but I still, unfortunately, had certain gut reactions to the movement of the creatures. Still, I pushed them aside and went back to the task at hand. As I gazed around the arena, I couldn't help but notice that none of the other teens seemed to have realized what the Nightmare had done with Snotlout. I also noticed just as quickly that they were all doing very well with the bonding process. I decided to walk around to each of them so I could take the notes I'd need to build their saddles, as well as answer any questions they might have. Neither the twins nor Fishlegs had anything to ask, so after a few minutes of measuring and planning, I left them to head back to Astrid and Stormfly.

"Well aren't you two just adorable?" I tried teasing her a little with some sarcasm, seeing as she was now curled up in a ball of scales and wings. Stormfly was happily purring away with her head in Astrid's lap. The girl just grinned at my comment, apparently too overwhelmed to say anything in return. Stormfly, on the other hand, opened an eye and spoke to me.

"_Tell Astrid she really knows how to help a dragon preen. I never thought I'd find a human I'd like enough to go through with a bonding ritual, let alone a Viking."_

"Wait, WHAT?" My shock managed to bring Astrid back to normal, only to have her sneer at me a little.

"What's with the shouting, Hiccup? Did Stormfly say something?" She didn't sound concerned, but was obviously curious of my outburst.

"Yes. Apparently grooming a Nadder is their bonding ritual. And here I thought you'd be eating half a fish, but something tells me I'm the

only one of the group to be forced to do that." I began taking saddle measurements from Stormfly while wondering what the others might be required to do when Astrid popped up from the ground and interrupted my note-taking.

"So you're telling me that Stormfly and I are... Bond sisters?" With a grin I nodded to her before moving back to her dragon to finish the saddle measurements. Just as I put my completed notes away I felt Astrid's arms quickly wrap around me in a hug that ended far too soon. She seemed to notice this, and with a quick glance around the arena to make sure everyone else was occupied, she gave me another short, sweet kiss on the cheek. It took me completely by surprise, knocking the support temporarily out of my legs. Astrid laughed at me before gesturing over to the Nightmare's cage and asking me a question.

"So, where's Snotlout, exactly?" She seemed more curious than concerned about his whereabouts, and after a moment of trying to remember how to talk, I was able to respond.

"Oh, he's just in the cage with the dragon. Don't worry, though. She's just playing with him." Just as the word left my mouth, the Nightmare's cage doors popped open and out came the dragon in question. Snotlout was sitting on her neck with his hands grasped on the dragon's large horns for support.

"For once I have to actually agree with Hiccup. Being afraid of this was a really, really stupid idea." He started giving the dragon a scratch on her head before sliding off to one side and landing successfully back on the stone floor. I made my way over to him to take the last saddle measurements I'd need when I noticed all of the teens and their dragons start forming a circle in the center of the arena. Small conversation broke out while I took the last bit of notes I'd need for the saddles, stopping only as I replaced my journal and entered the circle.

"So, tonight's been an amazing achievement. All I can suggest now is figuring out what you're going to call your new companions. Other than that, you should all use the rest of the time we have to keep getting to know each other. If you have any questions, just ask me, alright?" A unified chant of agreement came from dragon and Viking alike, and for once in my life I felt a sense of real accomplishment. This was what I wanted to do with my life. What I was meant to do with it. And considering the situation we were in, it looked like the Gods had given me proof of it.

* * *

><p>I'd spent the next two and a half hours walking around and answering simple questions while translating for my friends. I was beginning to think I'd be teaching Dragonese as well as dragon bonding if we managed to end this war, and more and more I was finding the thought inviting. As it turned out, I quite enjoyed teaching, and when it came to dragons, I was very good at it. I'd even tried helping Astrid learn a little bit of Dragonese, but despite her best efforts the only thing she recognized was the sound Stormfly called her by. Still, it was the best attempt I'd seen from the group to understand the language, and I made sure to tell her that so she didn't feel too discouraged. Luckily, she seemed to understand that I was a special case and not the rule, since she

dropped the issue and went back to spending time with Stormfly.<p>

When I wasn't walking around and giving assistance to the others, I was tucked away on a stool near the empty weapons rack, busying myself with drawing out more detailed saddle plans. I was just finishing up the design for a horn-anchoring mechanism for Snotlout's Nightmare when my journal was bumped lightly from below. I looked down to see the Terror, whom I'd been calling Gami, staring at me intently with an acorn in her mouth. Smiling, I reached down and grabbed the little nut from her jaw and whipped it across the arena, causing her to chase after it once more that evening. I put my journal away, having finished with all of my design choices, and continued playing a game of fetch with the little Terror while I gave the others a bit more time to bond. Still, the night was already halfway over, meaning the longer we stayed out, the more likely it was that someone would see us all heading back to town from the kill ring. Even with the excuse of paying the twins a visit, I doubted my father would shrug it off as nothing. With that in mind, I stood from my seat and stretched out a little, giving a large yawn before I called in the others.

"Alright, everyone? Over here," I shouted as I walked to the center of the arena. Gami was now perched on my shoulder and purring away as we all gathered for a final meeting before the end of the night. Standing across from the others, I couldn't help but feel a surge of happiness at the sight: Vikings and dragons alike, side by side, completely at ease and unafraid of one another. They all looked as floored by what was happening as I was, and in truth, the feeling of mutual astonishment was one I'd not soon forget. Still, I had to end our first taming session, so the thoughts would have to wait. "Well, I don't think I need to say much about our first session. It was more than expected, to say the least. We still have a long way to go, since these kinds of things take time, but tonight was a great start. Tomorrow night we'll continue where we left off, but we really won't have much of a chance to make any real headway until I finish making the five of you saddles. It shouldn't take very long, but it does mean I'm probably not going to be getting much of any sleep for the next few days." I paused for a moment to pull Gami from my shoulder. "It's time the dragons went back into their cages. Regardless of how we feel about it, it won't do us any good to get caught for something so small. So take a few minutes and say goodnight so we can get going." I cradled the little Terror in my arms, trying to sway the young thing to sleep before I sent her back to her cage. "Oh, and if anyone from the village notices us, tell them we were discussing dragon slaying strategies with the twins. Speaking of whom, Ruff, Tuff? Don't even think about sneaking the Zippleback out after we leave. That's a disaster waiting to happen." A few audible groans came from their direction, but they still mumbled an agreement my way as they led their dragon back to its enclosure. Astrid seemed the most upset about the end of the session, even going as far to give Stormfly a prolonged hug before wishing her a good night and locking her cage door.

After making sure we'd left no traces of our night with the dragons, the twins led the rest of us out of the arena and closed the gates. They both took a seat on a bench that looked as though they'd stolen it from the Meade Hall, but before I could mention it, Tuff started waving us off.

"Alright, the rest of you get out of here and go home. We all need some sleep." Ruff grinned a little, nodding in agreement.

"Yep. Even us. Tuffnut gets the first hour..."

"...And then Ruffnut here gets the second one. We're switching off every hour so one of us is always on guard. Gotta make sure we're not caught sleeping on the job. If you can even call this a job." We all shared a small, tired laugh over the joke, though from a lack of energy it didn't last long. A few more farewells were had before Snotlout, Fishlegs, Astrid and I were all on our way back to the village. Without much else to say Snotlout and Fishlegs both broke off and hurried for their respective houses, both eager to get as much sleep as they could before the morning dawned. I was about to say goodnight to Astrid and head off to the forge when she stuck a finger in my face.

"Hiccup, I know I can't tell you not to push yourself too hard. I know you'll just ignore me and go work for the rest of the night in that forge no matter what I say. But you need to sleep too, you know. You're only human." Her concern made me feel a deep sense of happiness, but I couldn't afford to sleep. Not just yet.

"I know, but I'd like to finish those saddles as quickly as possible. Just in case."

"Just in case what?"

"Just in case this raid exposes me to the village. If I have to leave I can't finish them, and if I can't finish them then flying won't be nearly that easy for the rest of you." Her look of disapproval told me she was about to say something about my fears, but instead I finished my thought in the hopes that I'd be able to get going. "Look, this is just something I have to do for you guys. Don't worry about me; I'll get at least a little sleep tonight. I promise, okay?" With a sigh she just nodded at me before pulling me in for a hug just as long and caring as the one she gave her dragon. For once I was in enough control of my own body to hug her back, and the feeling was enough to destroy the sensations of tiredness I'd begun having.

"Okay. But take care of yourself. There isn't anyone else in his village I like teasing more than you, and I can't exactly do that if you're too tired to react to it." She snapped back from the hug after that, but as quickly as she let go her hand shot forward, grabbed my vest and pulled me into a kiss harder than we'd ever shared. I nearly passed out.

"...And that was... For?" I managed to sputter a few seconds later, after she'd finished.

"_Simple._ That was for all of... This. Stormfly, the truth, dragon taming, showing me the person you really are. It's for everything you've done. Good night, Hiccup." She gave me another kind smile before heading off to her house, breaking into a run after glancing back at me once more. I stood there for a while, and after finally regaining the function of my legs I stumbled off to the forge.

* * *

><p>The sun was just beginning to peek through the service window of the forge as I cleaned up the mess I'd made over the past few hours. I was dirty, burned and cut in more than a few places and beyond exhausted, but all five saddles had been completely framed out. It took a bit of looking to figure out where I'd hide them, but eventually I settled on a corner of the forge's storage loft. Gobber never used it, considering how small it was; not to mention how hard going up a ladder could be with only one functioning arm and leg. I'd even forgotten it was there, despite my years apprenticing under Gobber, but until now I'd had no reason to use it. Still, with it in my head I made a mental note to clean the considerable mess I'd left my workshop in and use the loft more frequently. I didn't have enough time or energy to do it until later that day at the earliest, so I put it all out of my mind, cleaned myself up a bit with a rag and headed home.<p>

I slowly pulled the back door to my house open, hoping I wouldn't run into my father at all. Luckily I didn't see him, so I quickly made for my room, hoping to get in bed as quickly as I possibly could and pass out for at least a few hours before I was inevitably woken up. After a quick but silent dash up the stairs I pulled open my door only to find my father sitting on the edge of my bed, apparently waiting for me. He did not look at all happy to see how late I'd been out.

"Hiccup. It's morning already. Where have you been?" Panicked, I tried my hardest to force my overtired brain to come up with an explanation. I couldn't tell him about anything that actually happened, and I doubt he'd believe I spent until dawn talking to the twins about strategies. So I bluffed.

"Oh, I was, uh... Sleeping out in a field. It's way out past the forest. I go there sometimes to relax, and I must've, uh, dozed off." He gave me a disbelieving glare, but instead of asking anything else he stood up and walked to the door.

"Well, whatever you were doing, you're going to pay for it. Go to bed. I'll be waking you up in a little while." With that, he left the room, nearly slamming my door as he stalked down the stairs. I was nervous as to what he could actually be thinking, but considering my brain was actively beginning to shut off I just backed over to my bed, where I collapsed.

* * *

><p>AN:**_ Thanks again to Ferdoos for spelling fixes._

15. Chiefly Suspicions

A/N:_Chapter fifteen! This took me a little longer than I expected to finish, but now that it's finally done I must say I'm happy with it. I've got more story points to iron out for the next few chapters, but expect something big to happen soon. And I'm not just talking about the raid._

* * *

><p>Not three hours after passing out I was unceremoniously thrown

from my bed, having jerked myself awake from the sound of my door slamming open.<p>

"Get up, Hiccup. It's your own fault for being out all night." It was all my father had to say to me before turning around and leaving the house. My worries from a few hours ago resurfaced, and I began wondering once more what he could be thinking about what I'd been up to. Still, I tried not to think too much of it, considering I wasn't a mind reader.

After tidying up the mess I'd made of my bed I wandered out toward the Meade Hall in a sleep-deprived haze. Without much thought I grabbed a plate and some milk before taking my seat next to Astrid at our usual table. Everyone looked rather tired, a fact I was certain my father had already noticed. From the corner of my eye I could see him and Gobber having a muffled conversation, occasionally stealing glances at our table. I tried to ignore it and took a large bite of whatever it was I'd grabbed, paying absolutely no attention to the flavors in my mouth.

"Man, Hiccup, for once you actually smell like a Viking. What were you doing last night?" Snotlout seemed to enjoy seeing me with an actual Viking trait; one that I regrettably hadn't had much time to address. The lingering smell of the forge coupled with the blood and sweat I'd spent working on those saddles the night before was generating a mildly unpleasant scent. I was both embarrassed and amused at the table's reactions, all of which were somewhere between disgust and surprise considering my usual bathing habits. Looking to move on to a more palatable topic, I ignored him and quietly began filling them all in on their new riding equipment while I finished whatever it was I had been eating. News of their saddles nearing completion seemed to wake them all up a little more, and their newfound excitement didn't go unnoticed by my father. He and Gobber began mumbling to each other once more, and with a nervous gulp from my glass I reminded myself that he was probably too far away to have heard me. Just as the thought crossed my mind, though, the both of them stood from their table and began walking toward the massive double doors of the Meade Hall. As they passed our group I noticed my father staring at me, as though he was trying to crack open my mind with his own thoughts. He never looked at me like that unless he knew I was hiding something from him, and considering how he'd been acting around me he must've known it was something big. Despite having finished eating, I waited for him and Gobber to leave the hall and get a fair distance away before I even thought of heading to the cove.

"Hiccup," Astrid started, keeping her voice quiet enough that the others paid no attention to her, "what's with your dad? He hasn't looked that angry with you since the last raid."

"I'm not sure, to be honest. But for him to be acting like this tells me he knows something's up. I doubt he suspects anyone but me for keeping secrets, so I wouldn't worry too much about it, if I were you. But, I'm me, so..." I let my voice trail off while my mind wandered to the forge and all of the dragon related paraphernalia I had stored there. Suddenly, the idea of leaving out all of those mockups and drawings on my workbench seemed to be the most reckless thing I'd ever done. "I'm going to get some sleep at the cove in a bit, but first I think I should head to the forge and tidy up my workshop. No one ever goes back there, but if my father does he might

see some drawings of Toothless. And saddle ideas. And those Dragonscale blueprints..." I didn't have to look at her to know Astrid was staring intently at my temple, probably getting ready to quietly scold me for doing something so stupid.

"Hiccup... You really need to be more careful. Especially with this kind of thing." I felt a light bump to my arm before she continued. "You should probably get over there right now and cover your tracks. I'd go with you, but I've got some chores to do, plus my mother wants to see how my fighting techniques are coming along." She almost seemed worried about that, considering she'd been slacking a bit on her training since this all started. Even so, I had no doubt she could do it, and knowing her, she'd convince herself of it before long. "You'll be fine, alright? I'll see you later." With a wave goodbye she left for the double doors, and after cleaning my place at the table I followed suit.

* * *

><p>Gobber wasn't at the forge when I arrived, but the hearth was hot and there were an assortment of tools strewn about where he normally spent most of his time working. I paid little attention to it as I quickly slipped into the back room and immediately began grabbing any dragon related papers and making a single pile out of them. It only took me a few minutes to gather everything I could find and wrap it up with some twine I'd taken from a storage barrel. I grabbed Toothless's saddle and tailfin from behind my workbench, the bundle of papers and the bucket of Toothless's shed scales and moved them to the corner of the workroom where the loft door was located. I reached up and opened it, threw my contraband up through the hole and climbed in myself. After looking back into the storage room to make sure I hadn't left anything important behind, I closed the door and went to sorting my growing dragon stash. Once I was satisfied that my collection looked no different than any of the other decrepit, miscellaneous items forgotten in the loft, I made to open the trapdoor when I heard Gobber's voice come from below.<p>

"Stoick, I don' think there's anythin' to worry abou' here. Hiccup's a Viking, after all. Maybe he jus' needed some time ta figure out how ta handle tha beasts?" I stopped dead in my tracks when I realized both Gobber and my father had walked into the smithy. I knew I'd be stuck up here for a long while if they didn't leave, since my only way out was through the main forge area. I kept my breathing as quiet as possible while I hoped the hammering of my heart only sounded loud in my own ears.

"He's hiding something, Gobber. I know he is. He's always disappearing into that damn forest, and I'm too busy to follow... Hold on a second." My father's abrupt halt in conversation made my heart sink; had I left something in the forge somehow? Before I could think about it, though, the sound of rustling cloth came to my ears. My father had just walked into my workshop. "Hm. Not here. Well, at least he isn't eavesdropping." A few more moments of silence followed, and I was certain they'd lead me to an early grave if he didn't leave sooner than later. "You know, I never realized how much of an artist Hiccup is. Have you ever looked at these drawings back here, Gobber? He really has put a lot of detail into those machines, even if they never worked." I felt a bit of relief in the next bout of silence. He was only looking at what was left of the plans I'd made for a few failed dragon killing devices, not anything I'd

mistakenly left behind.

"I can' say I ever come back 'ere fer very long. I like ta give the boy a little privacy now an' then. Speakin' o' which, Stoick, I don' think he'd like it if he knew ya were lookin' at his stuff." I made a mental note to knit Gobber the best pair of undies I could for Snoggletog while I silently waited for them both to leave my workshop.

"Probably. But I still think he's hiding something. Why else would he be running off all the time?"

"I don' know, Stoick. But he's been doin' it fer years. Why do ya suddenly care now?"

"He's still my son, Gobber, and I know him better than he realizes. Something about his disappearances seems off this time. I mean, he was out all night, and you and I both know the forge was hot this morning. He already won that bet, so what could he possibly need to work on that would take him all night to do it?"

"I don' know, Stoick. But it's not like he's hurtin' anyone. Besides, he's been buildin' stuff in here for years withou' permission. Kinda late to tell 'im he can't anymore, isn' it?"

"Not if he's doing something behind our backs. Not if it's another one of those things he builds. Not if he's going to burn the place down agai-"

"Stoick! He's not a lil' kid anymore. He won' be burnin' nothin' down. Jus' have a little faith in the boy, wouldja?" Gobber's sentiment was followed by a long sigh I'd grown very used to hearing over the years.

"I suppose... Maybe you're right, Gobber. Hel, maybe he's making something for Herja's girl, Astrid. They have been spending a lot of time together lately."

"Now there's a though'. But wha'ever it is, it's not yer business. You know how you were with yer father, breathin' down yer neck all th' time when Val was around ya. Anyway, let's git out of Hiccup's lil' cubby already. We both have work ta do, righ'?"

"Right, Gobber. Let's... Hold on a minute." I froze yet again. This time my father's voice sounded out with suspicion, and it made my blood run cold just as the sound of quietly crumpling paper came from below. "What's this a drawing of? No dragon I've ever seen before. And is that a... Saddle?" Once more the building was bathed in silence as my mind went back to a few days ago. When I let Fishlegs take one of my paintings of Toothless, I intentionally left out anything that involved riding him. Now my father had a drawing of Toothless wearing a saddle, and I didn't like how easy it made connecting the dots as to what I needed private forge access for.

"Well, ya said it yerself, Stoick. Tha' boy's got an eye fer art, and an imagination to boot. Saddlin' up a dragon... Only Hiccup would think a tha'. Ya never know what's goin' on in tha' head a his."

"Maybe I do. Maybe he really did shoot down that Night Fury at Raven's Point." Immediately the thought of grabbing the unfinished tack I'd been making for Toothless and leaving Berk came to mind. If my father decided to get a search party together to look for my best friend, it'd only be a matter of time before they found the cove.

"Oh, not this again. Tha boy didn' shoot down no dragon an' he hasn' been studyin' no dragon. Hiccup woulda been ripped apart in a second if he tried gettin' close to a Night Fury, an' ya know it. You need to stop wit' the crazy ideas an' accept that yer son's fightin' dragons with his brain instead of his... Well, he hasn' got much brawn, but ya know what I mean. Be proud of him, Stoick."

"I am proud of him, but it still doesn't add up." The sound of paper crumpling met my ears once more, and I was afraid I knew exactly what it meant. "Maybe he is just using his brain. Either way, I'm keeping this. I doubt he'll notice it's missing anyway, considering the state of this place."

"Do what ya will, but I'm tellin' ya, yer wastin' yer time." Gobber stopped for a moment, grunting in tune with a loud click. "I got me hammer arm on. Now let's go fix tha' hole in the barn roof already." I heard no response from my father as they both walked off for the far end of Berk. I gave them a few more minutes to distance themselves from the smithy, slipped out of the trapdoor and snuck into the main forge area. With a quick glance out of the service window to make sure no one was watching, I bolted for the forest.

* * *

><p>"Nothing's going to happen." Toothless's response to my story was blunt and without a hint of worry. He barely even lifted his head from his napping position in the den to respond to my frantic explanation. I was partially grateful for it, though, considering I was also trying to quickly clean myself in the lake while I spoke. "_Even if they decided to search the forest, which they won't, they wouldn't find me before the raid. Once that hits, your father will probably forget all about the drawing."_ I hopped out of the water, quickly dried myself and began pulling my tunic back on just as a leathery wing lightly pushed me out of the way of the den entrance. Toothless walked out into the early afternoon air and started reaching his wings up to the sky the moment he had the room. While giving in to an entire body stretch very reminiscent of a cat, I noticed his tail to grab our riding gear. "_I know you're exhausted, but I'm starving. We're getting some fish before you get some sleep."_ I hadn't paid any attention to the sluggish response my body had been sending my brain since I left the forge, but with the adrenaline finally wearing off combined with my newfound cleanliness, it was becoming more and more apparent I needed sleep. Still, I knew I'd get none with a hungry dragon around, so I saddled Toothless up and prepared for takeoff just as a familiar voice called out my name. Looking back I saw Astrid climbing quickly down into the cove. She ran right up to Toothless, patted him on the nose and turned to me.

"I saw you running over here a little while ago. Is something wrong? You weren't exactly moving slowly." I didn't want to worry anyone, but now that she was here I knew Astrid wouldn't be leaving just because I asked. With a sigh I decided to give her the abridged

story.

"It's nothing, really. Gobber and my dad found a drawing of Toothless in the forge after I cleaned up my workshop. I was hiding when I heard them enter and kinda wound up eavesdropping on them. But Toothless here told me not to worry about it, so I'm not going to. And neither should you." Astrid gave me a blank stare for a moment before sighing, herself.

"Alright, I won't. But like I told you, you really should be more careful, Hiccup. Next time it might not be a drawing he finds." She looked from me to the dragon, giving him a hard scratch under his jaw. "So, going for a joyride? Mind if I come with?" The look of anticipation on her face was one I could never say no to. I was about to tell her to get on when something came to mind.

"Wait, didn't you have chores to do?" My mouth pulled into a mocking little smirk, the way it usually did when I joked around with her. "What, you're skipping your duties to hang out with me? Funny, I thought most people didn't like the Hiccups, but here you are asking for more." Despite being considerably higher off the ground than she was, it didn't stop her from punching my arm in response. I winced, but I did it with a smile.

"Real funny, smartass. I finished with my chores and then sliced a beetle in half from thirty feet with a well aimed axe throw. Apparently that was good enough for my mother, since she walked away without saying a word." I stared at her for a moment, amazed at her claim. I probably wouldn't have even noticed the bug, let alone manage to cut it in half. "Speechless. That's more like it. Now can I come with, or not?" She put a hand on her hip and cocked her head to one side, giving me a look of victory.

"Alright, alright, you can come with. But, since you always have to be the winner in this friendship, why don't you take the front seat?" I pulled off my riding vest and tossed it to her as I slid back in the saddle. "It'll be fun, and a great learning experience. I'll still keep my foot on the controls, at least until you're comfortable enough with it to fly on your own. That is, of course, as long as it's alright with you, Bud." I patted the dragon in question on the head.

"_As long as I get food I don't care which of the two of you fly me. Just make sure we don't hit anything._"

"Well, he's fine with it. What do you say, Astrid?" I reached out a hand to the girl, who I noticed was wearing a very surprised expression. Still, upon hearing her name she pulled the vest on and grabbed my outstretched hand. I helped her into her seat, hooked the vest's straps to the saddle for her and wrapped my arms around her. Despite trying to act normal, I couldn't help but burst out into a big stupid grin with the situation I now found myself in.

"Alright, my foot goes here, right?" She pointed to the stirrup she was sticking her foot into. I used my left leg to push hers up a little further into the stirrup before placing my own foot next to hers.

"That's right. Just try to keep your foot tight under the strap, otherwise it might come out during a hard turn. Learned that one the

hard way. I was picking pine needles out of my vest for hours after that one." After making sure Astrid was ready I angled my foot backward, opening the tailfin and causing Toothless to spread his wings. "Ready when you are, bud." With a whirl of cold air we were in the sky, though flying less gracefully than normal considering the awkward position Astrid and I were in. It looked like it might take a little longer than normal to reach our usual fishing spot near Helheim's Gate, so I decided to take the time to ease Astrid into how the controls felt. With the wind making regular conversation difficult, I asked her to feel the way my ankle moved with the stirrup, and how every little movement could greatly affect our speed and direction. It took a bit of hand-holding on my part, but sooner than I'd expected she started following my movements with the kind of precision she handled an axe. We kept to easier flight patterns more suited to her inexperience, but it really didn't matter. I could tell she was enthralled with the whole thing, and that's all I really wanted out of it.

"This is... This really is amazing, Hiccup. It's way different than just holding on. Will I have this much control on Stormfly, though?"

"I don't see why not. Once the dragon gets used to the rider, they fly as one. At least, that's how it is for Toothless and I." Toothless grunted in agreement as I slowly began removing my foot from the stirrup to let Astrid take over. She might not have been as skilled as I was, but she definitely had no problem keeping us steady in the air. Once she realized she was fully in control, we shuddered a bit and dropped closer to the ocean. Still, she evened us out quickly enough, and after a bit of experimenting with the control mechanism, she pulled us straight up into the clouds. "You're doing it! Just make sure not to stall for too long before we start descending or you might fall off!" Right as I said it, though, she unhooked from the saddle, just as I had, and within seconds the three of us went from flying to freefalling. Astrid seemed nearly terrified of what she'd done, even though she'd free-fallen with us before, but it wasn't more than a few seconds before she snapped her eyes to me and just went with the fall. Eventually we regrouped on Toothless's back, this time with the reins back in my hands.

"Well, that was a ride. I take it that's exactly how your first freefall went, considering the warning?" I laughed at the reminder, but in hindsight that little mistake turned out to be a bit of a blessing in disguise. After my first fall from Toothless, I found I no longer had any fear of heights.

"Yeah, something like that. Sure did wake me up, though. Now let's go catch some food, since I'm sure Toothless is getting restless." The dragon looked back to me and nodded before dragging us into a plunge to the ocean, where he let out a large fireball on an unsuspecting walrus making its way to a nearby island. I nosed us down toward the water, which began kicking up as we flew overhead. As soon as Toothless grabbed the lifeless walrus we rocketed to the sky and immediately started heading back to the cove.

"A whole walrus? I thought dragons mainly ate fish. And sheep, and maybe cow if they get lucky." Astrid sounded a bit surprised at Toothless's choice of meal, but the truth was that dragons didn't discriminate when it came to food.

"He'll eat the whole thing over the course of a few days, bones and all. As it turns out, the only thing a dragon won't eat is another dragon. And a human, since apparently we don't taste very good." Toothless made a gagging sound in response, which pulled a little laugh from Astrid and I. We quieted down quickly, deciding to relax and enjoy the scenery rather than shout over the whipping winds. We reached the cove before long, and the moment Toothless was out of his flying gear he grabbed his kill, bounded to the far end of the cove and started ripping it to shreds. Astrid actually cringed a little at the bone-crunching sounds echoing from across the lake.

"How do you get used to that sound?"

"You don't, really. But at least he's being quiet about it this time. The last time he caught a walrus, I could hear him tearing it apart from outside the cove." A mighty crack came from the other side of the lake, right in tune with my body quaking and letting use a large yawn. "Still not enough to keep me from falling asleep, though." I walked over to the den, kicked off my boots and put my riding vest away. "I'm going to work in the smithy when I wake up later today. After my little near-miss earlier this morning I think it'd be a good idea to finish this project as quickly as I can. It'll probably be around four, assuming Gobber's finished by then. Does that work for you?"

"That's fine. I didn't have anything planned today, anyway. How are you going to wake yourself up, though?" Part of my brain wished I could ask her to do that for me, but I didn't think it was appropriate. We might have gotten a lot more comfortable around one another in a short amount of time, but the last time she slept here was still fresh in my mind, and I had a feeling it was still in hers. Instead, I told her how I normally woke up in the cove.

"Toothless. Either he listens for the hourly horns from the village or dragons are exceptional at telling time, but either way I still get up on time. Usually."

"_I always wake you up on time. You just don't always listen._" Toothless had momentarily stopped crunching on his meal to pick on me a little from across the cove. By this point in our relationship I'd grown used to his banter, and even found our mock arguments enjoyable.

"I don't believe you're part of this conversation, now stop eavesdropping and get back to chewing on your manatee."

"_It's a walrus. Manatees aren't as tasty._"

"Whatever! Just get back to your delicious sea cow already!"

"_I will. And you won't get any of it. Now say goodbye to your mate and get to sleep._" With that last comment, Toothless's crunching continued. Smiling, I turned my attention back to a very amused looking Astrid.

"I could only understand half of that back-and-forth, but it was still entertaining to watch. You're like two lifelong friends. Anyway, I should get going, and you should get going to sleep. Have a good nap." She pulled me in for a quick hug before turning and saying goodbye to Toothless. I stood there and watched her climb back to the

main exit, and once she was out of sight, I turned and crawled into the den.

* * *

><p>By seven in the evening I'd already spent several hours in the forge, silently working away at finishing Toothless's saddle. I'd become so efficient with scale knitting that the saddle itself was looking to take no more than few more hours to complete, so I put it away at sunset and got back to work on the problem of control. Toothless's old saddle controls were rigged together with highly flammable rope, the likes of which couldn't be used for the new one. It would be a point of weakness, and a very large one, since its destruction would cause us to fall from the sky. Considering I had no plans that involved plummeting to my death at any point in the future, it wasn't a point I could skimp on, and finding a proper solution was beginning to pump up my frustrations. For what felt like the hundredth time that evening I looked to a blank page of my open journal on the workbench, next to several crumpled up sheets and a few broken pencils.<p>

"I can't re-use rope, leather wouldn't handle the pressure well, chains won't work and there isn't anything else on this tiny little island that wouldn't break apart in minutes!" I ran my hands through my hair while I kept trying to come up with solutions. "I could try knitting rope out of some scales, but I don't know how well they'd take to the tension. Not to mention how long it would take to make." At this point I wasn't even talking to Astrid so much as I was vocalizing my own thoughts in the vain hope that a solution might pop out at me from my surroundings.

"You've already said that a few times, you know." Astrid's voice pulled my attention back around to her, and for a moment I was almost angry that she'd tell me such a thing. With a frustrated sigh I scolded myself internally for the thought, since she'd volunteered her own time for my sake. I reminded myself to be grateful of that while she hopped off the far end of the workbench and walked over to me. "Maybe instead of repeating the same things over and over," she started, as she poked a finger against my forehead, "you could try making something new to fix the problem." I stared at her for a moment with an eyebrow raised in question. Maybe it was my frazzled brain not functioning well after working it so hard, but I hadn't the slightest idea of what she meant, and it showed. "I mean, why focus on things other Vikings have already made? You're smarter than they were, so use that brain of yours to think of something else to use."

"Like what?"

"Like a metal rope or something! I don't know, I'm not the genius." Her comment made me break into a smile, and for more than just her 'genius' remark.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that. After all, I think you just solved our problem." Astrid gave me a scrutinizing look as she cocked her head to one side.

"Oh really? And how did I do that?"

"Metal rope. I hadn't even considered trying to make it, but it's as

brilliant as it is obvious. Making a rope out of metal instead of hemp should fix the flammability problem nicely." I shuffled over to my storage room, grabbed a few steel rods and brought them over to the workbench. "Gobber usually uses these rods to make chains for the docks. I've even helped him do it before, and yet I never even considered using them for another purpose." I stood there for a moment, eying the gathering of rods I'd placed on the bench next to Astrid. After a bit of thinking I went back to my journal, grabbed a fresh pencil and started jotting down notes. "Problem is, I don't have the time or the expertise to do this right now." I finished up with my measurements and thoughts, tore out the page and placed it on the workbench. "I'll just leave this here. Knowing Gobber, when he sees these rods and the note tomorrow morning, he'll start working on a solution."

"Workin' on a solution fer wha'?" The sound of Gobber's voice just beyond the cloth over the doorway caused both Astrid and I to jump. Immediately I stashed my journal in my vest and threw the crumpled journal pages into the hearth before responding as calmly as I could.

"Oh, uh, Gobber! Hi! Uh, just an idea I had... Just now. What are, uh, what are you doing here? I thought you said I'd have some privacy."

"Oh, hush up with tha'. I'm only here fer me mug, an' then ya can git back to what you were doin'. But I am curious o' what you're sayin' I'll be doin' tomorra." Wide-eyed, I turned on my heel and grabbed the bucket of scales still sitting by the hearth and made for the back room while I gestured for Astrid to let him in. From my workshop I could hear the thunk of his wooden peg leg over Astrid's voice.

"Hiccup's in the back, but he told me to let you in. We were just talking about an idea we had when you interrupted us." After making sure the loft's trapdoor was shut tight, I walked back into the forge room where I saw Gobber hunched over my notes.

"Ooh, this here's a great idea! Reminds me o' a few years ago. I had the same though' in me head, but after a nigh' a drinkin' with Stoick I kinda fergot about it." Astrid and I both palmed our heads in unison at the comment, much to the delight of the one armed man between us. "Oh, don' be like tha' you two, not when I'm gonna help ya. I get the feelin' ya need this fer what yer workin' on in private, an even though Stoick migh' not be happy with me doin' it, I can' say no to a project like this. Gimmie a few days and you should have yer rope. An' a lot of it, too. This stuff'll be great at the docks." Stuffing the note into his back pocket, Gobber turned and grabbed his mug, locking it in place on his stump. "Alrigh', that's all I needed here. You two be careful, now. Don' need ya gettin' burned or hurt, unless it's a dragon doin' it." He turned for the door with a little laugh, flipped the cloth out of his way and disappeared in the direction of the Meade Hall. Finally alone again, I let out a breath of relief before heading back into my workshop. I was determined to finish the saddle that evening, and before the next taming session at midnight, if I could handle it.

* * *

><p>The second night of taming was going just as well as the previous

night had. I was sitting near the weapon rack again that evening, giving a sleeping Gami a neck scratch while I observed the others with their dragons. The twins were both on their Zippleback, each climbing the neck of their chosen dragon head and then sliding back down to the body. The dragon itself seemed very pleased with both their actions and the fact that they were doing something without a single ounce of bickering. While they were enjoying themselves, Snotlout was busy just trying to get his dragon to do something besides lie on her back.<p>

"You see those two?" He pointed his arm back to the twins, still sliding down their dragon necks. "They look like they're having the most fun they've ever had, and all you're doing is lying on the floor. Let's do something like that already!" The Nightmare let off a deep rumbling that pulled at the corners of my mouth, resonating a message I felt obligated to tell Snotlout.

"She wants you go give her a belly rub." Right as the worlds left my mouth the Nightmare nodded her head and shifted a bit, exposing more of her undercarriage.

"You're joking. Do I really have to do this?"

"Yes, Snotlout. It's part of the bonding process, so get in there and do it. Hel, look at Fishlegs and Meatlug. They're having the time of their lives." Fishlegs had his oddly named dragon lying on her back while he scrubbed away with a broom head that had separated from its handle. Much like Toothless usually did during a scrub down, she was kicking her leg out in glee at the attention while Fishlegs spoke inane baby talk to her. There was an audible cringe to go along with Snotlout's facial expression, but despite his hesitation he eventually caved.

"Fine. I'll do this. But I'm not going to babble like an idiot." He finally began scratching the dragon's belly as a large blast of air blew my hair and woke Gami from her nap. Looking over to the far right cage, I saw Astrid and Stormfly once again practicing rider signals, a drill they'd been focusing on since we entered the arena. As I sat there on my chair by the arena exit, I couldn't help but stare in admiration at the two of them hovering effortlessly in the small amount of space allotted below the chain ceiling. They kept it up for a bit longer, letting Stormfly stretch out her wings before descending back to the arena floor. I stood from my stool, placed Gami on my shoulder and walked over to the both of them.

"That was quite the impressive show. I get the feeling I'm going to have some competition to watch out for once this is all over." Astrid looked like she was about to meet my statement with a confident agreement when all five of the dragons in the ring jumped to their feet in unison. Stormfly sank down to the ground and actually shook Astrid off of her before quickly turning back to her cage.

"_Tell Astrid I'm sorry, but you all need to leave, now. Someone's coming._" I needed no convincing of Stormfly's blunt statement.

"Everyone, get your dragons back in their cages. We need to leave, now!" I ran Gami to her cage, gave her a quick hug and placed her in the darkness behind her feeding door. I turned to see if anyone needed help locking the cage doors only to find all of the other

teens already on their way to the exit. I caught up to them right as Fishlegs threw the inner gate open himself, and with a clear path we scattered for the village while the twins covered our tracks and tried to act as they usually did. I quickly ducked into a nearby patch of forest, deciding to use one of my many paths through the brush to conceal myself from whoever the dragons had heard. I nearly had a panic attack when the sound of rustling leaves came to my ears and expected to find my father staring me down, only to turn and see Astrid breathing nervously next to me.

"Hiccup, what did Stormfly say? Did she hear your father coming?" Apparently Astrid's thoughts had gone to the same person mine had, but despite my assumptions I had no proof it was him.

"She only told me they heard someone coming. She didn't know who it was." I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the tree I was sitting next to, hoping to calm my heart down a little. "But I don't see how it could be anyone else. I mean, he's definitely suspicious I'm doing something behind his back, and apparently he thinks the dragons have something to do with it." Opening my eyes, I stood and looked at her. "If that's the case, I don't think it'd be a good idea to get caught here. Let's get back to the village. We can take a path I know through the woods." I pointed in the direction of a concealed trail in the distance she probably couldn't see, but she followed me without question. "Stormfly's sorry for bucking you from her back, by the way. But something tells me I don't have to tell you for you to know that." Walking next to me Astrid's face broke into a small smile.

"I had a feeling she did it for a good reason. Besides, It's not like I'm going to hold it against her if she had her reasons for it. I am kinda sore from that landing, though." She rubbed her side lightly, wincing a bit from the action. "That'll leave a bruise. Not like anyone's going to question it, considering we're Vikings." She sighed lightly and glanced up to the lightly overcast sky. "It'll be great when we can finally leave that damn cage and get her above the clouds again. I bet she's looking forward to it." She kept her eyes above us for most of the walk through the woods despite being barely capable of seeing the stars beyond the treetops and the cloud cover. Still, what light was shining through was apparently enough for her imagination.

"She probably is." I stopped us both for a moment to gauge where we were, eventually coming to the realization that the main path to the cove was nearby. "Let's go this way. If we take this path back to Berk, we should come out by the town square." I grabbed her hand and began walking us to town when the very loud sound of rustling leaves came from in front of us. We stopped dead in our tracks and turned to the source of the noise only to see my father staring at both of us. Instinctively I went to rip my hand from Astrid's, but she didn't let go.

"So, what have you two been doing out here this late at night?" My father's voice was far from what I expected. Rather than the angry, grating voice I'd heard this morning, he seemed very jovial. Astrid clenched my hand a little harder and answered for the both of us while my brain slowly began to realize why he was acting so differently.

"Oh, nothing, really. Just out for a midnight stroll, alone. Just the

two of us, talking about what we might be facing for tomorrow's training session." Astrid spoke softly in a voice I'd rarely ever heard from her. My father laughed in response, walked forward and clamped a hand on my shoulder.

"Talking! Just walking and talking, is that right? Well, I've never been one to interrupt a strategy conversation, so I'll leave you two to get back to 'talking.' Don't be out all night now, Hiccup. You've got to be up and ready to go tomorrow morning!" He laughed a little more and slapped me on the back, nearly bringing me to the ground in the process. I forced a smile while he walked off, still laughing a bit and talking to himself under his breath. I leaned against a tree with my free hand to keep myself from falling over when Astrid let out a long breath and turned to me.

"You're probably going to be getting a lot more teasing out of him, but hopefully now he'll stop suspecting you're hiding something." My hand slid from hers, and in that moment I cringed internally. Not that I had any problems at all with him thinking my 'secret' was spending time with Astrid, but I really didn't want to deal with more of his heckling. Still, it was better than the alternative.

"Part of me thinks this could end up being worse, knowing him." I ran a hand through my hair while I looked out to the village, making sure he was indeed out of sight before I said anything else. "But since he thinks I'll be with you tonight, I think I'll get into the forge for a few hours. I should be able to finish one or two of the other dragon saddles without having to worry about him barging in on me. I won't even need to use the hearth, since the frames are finished. All I need to do now is some leatherwork." I was about to wish Astrid a good night when she grabbed my arm and started walking us to the smithy.

"If you're going, then so am I. It'd be a bit strange for me to get home hours before you do when your father thinks we're out in the woods together." Her hand slid down my arm, stopping only when it met my own. "He's partially right. After all, we will be alone, just the two of us, in the forge. Who knows what might happen?" I went from walking to stumbling almost immediately, which she laughed at once again. "I'm sorry, Hiccup, but that will never get old. Now let's get going already."

* * *

><p>We didn't spend nearly as much time working as I had the night before, but with both of us working together the job had gone quite smoothly. Astrid might not have had any experience with saddle making, but under my guidance she became quite a boon at doing the little, tedious tasks that would slow me down while I worked on assembling the pre-cut pieces. When we finally decided to stop for the night, three finished saddles were piled on top of Toothless's finished dragonscale saddle in the loft. The only two left to do belonged to the twins and, considering the private time I still had left in the forge, they would probably be finished before the end of tomorrow.<p>

"You ready to go, Astrid?" I double checked the trapdoor to the loft before exiting my workshop only to find her rinsing her hands off in a bucket of water next to the hearth.

"Absolutely. My hands are killing me and I'm looking forward to crawling into bed." I blew out the remaining candle on the workbench as we both walked out into the silent evening. "So, got any plans for tomorrow?"

"We're going to be up against the twins' Zippelback, but I can't say I have any ideas for it. At this point I don't really feel like I have anything to be nervous about. It'll work out, especially since the whole thing is rigged."

"This is true. Anyway, I'd rather you focus on finishing those last two saddles than worry about tomorrow's match. I want to get in the air as soon as possible, and I don't think I'm the only one." She looked up again that evening, sighing happily to herself as she looked at the cloudy sky. "Can you imagine what things will be like around here once we kill the queen? We'll be the first recognized Dragon riders of Berk. Probably the first dragon riders ever."

"I'm not so sure about that. When Toothless first mentioned the concept of a bond brother to me, he said it was an old dragon term they used when talking about their riders. I think humans and dragons probably lived like that for a long time before the queen came along."

"Wait, really? Do you think there might be others like us, then?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but it's probably fair to say they existed at some point. There might even still be areas where dragons and humans live together, unaffected by the Queen's mating calls. But I don't think it's something we should bother worrying about. If they do exist, we're probably not going to get any help from them."

"Right. Once we get into the air with our dragons, all we should be focusing on is attack strategies. That'll be the only thing to end all of this." Per her usual goodbye, Astrid grabbed a handful of my vest and pulled me in for a quick kiss. After a moment she let go and stepped back a bit from me with a smile on her face. "I'll see you tomorrow, Hiccup."

"Good night." It was all I had thought of to say in reply as my feet automatically carried me home. While most of my brain kept repeating the memories of her kiss in my head, part of it went back to the thought of another dragon rider. Surely, they would have to exist, or the term bond brother wouldn't be part of Toothless's vocabulary. I continued wondering if I would ever come across someone else who rode a dragon, or maybe even rode a Night Fury, until I noticed I was entering my house. I opened the door with caution but relaxed immediately upon hearing my father's snores echoing from his room. After climbing the stairs and getting into bed I let my mind drift back to another rider and another dragon coming from some far distant land to take down the queen instead of us. It was a comforting thought that I nearly went to sleep on, but a distant voice in the back of my mind wouldn't let me think of things like that. No one was coming to save us. If we would ever have the chance to end this war, it'd have to be done by people on Berk. Only by my friends. Only by Toothless and I leading the fight.

With that, I drifted into a different kind of comforting slumber.

16. Saddling Up

**A/N: **Writer's block is a hell of a drug. Regardless, this story is finally moving into a part that I've been looking forward to for a while now, so hopefully the next chapter will be up before the month ends. Anyway, I hope you enjoy it.

* * *

><p>It had been a little less than three days since my father interrupted our second training session and caught Astrid and I alone in the woods. As fortunate as it was for him to think my secret involved romance, the extra cover it gave me only lasted until the next morning, during breakfast. We were at our usual table in the Meade Hall and quietly discussing Barfbelch and Hookfang, the last two dragons to receive their names, when we were interrupted by my father. I managed to cobble together a line or two about naming a dragon making it seem more intelligent than stupid, meaning we would be less likely to underestimate it, but I was afraid he wouldn't buy it. Luckily, my flimsy logic just seemed to confuse him, and it was enough for us to be left alone without any more fuss. Though, it didn't keep him from glaring at me whenever he had the opportunity.<p>

The first three days of the week went by smoothly, not considering my father. We faked our training sessions in the mornings and bonded with the dragons in the evenings, all without the village, or its chief, being any the wiser. By our fourth lesson the only pair who hadn't successfully kept aloft was Snotlout and Hookfang, and only because the arena was much too small for the dragon to really open her wings. Even so, the two of them had built a bit of trust between one another, meaning they would probably have few issues when we finally did get into the skies over Berk.

By nightfall on Odin's day, Astrid and I were heading back to the forge for the last time to put in some work on my Dragonscale tunic. I knew I wouldn't have enough time to complete it, but I had nothing else to work on before my bet with Gobber expired. The twins' saddles had been finished, bundled with the others, wrapped in a blanket and hidden in a small cave in the forests by the arena. I decided to move them from the forge to a more appropriate hiding spot after completing them, which left only my tunic and Toothless' riding gear as evidence of what I'd been using my bet with Gobber for.

I half-expected to see my father waiting for Astrid and I when we arrived at the Smithy. Thankfully the building and surrounding area were nearly devoid of people, allowing us to slip in unnoticed. Astrid closed off the inside of the forge from prying eyes while I headed into my workshop and lit the two masses of wax on either side of the bench. Armed with a bit of light I pulled out an old book of experimental weapons I'd decided to keep and flipped to the last sketch I'd drawn in it. After copying the plans and calculations to some spare parchment, I began fixing my old mistakes and fleshing out a few unfinished details. Since I was only planning to use it as a distraction for my father, I didn't feel the need to make it very accurate; it only needed to be more than he could understand to pass his inspection, should he demand to know what I was doing with the forge.

While I was working, the cloth door to my workshop moved to one side and Astrid walked in. She stood behind me for a few minutes, watching me work, when suddenly I felt her head resting on my left shoulder. She crossed her arms across my chest and stayed there for a moment more before lightly tapping my head with hers.

"So what are you drawing back here? It reminds me of that giant crossbow thing you built a few months ago, only it doesn't have a bow at the end of it. Which, considering your track record, might not be a bad thing. Also, didn't you say you were done with building these?"

"I did, yes. And I am. This one's just to convince my father that I'm still trying to kill dragons rather than befriend them. It also explains me wanting private forge access, since I'm technically no longer allowed to build weaponry Gobber can't understand." I stopped speaking for a moment to fix some mathematical errors and get a final idea of the resources I'd need. Even if I didn't plan on ever building it, I still felt the need to make it as believable as possible, regardless of whether or not someone else would ever notice. "It looks like I'd need about half a tree's worth of wood and enough leather and steel to more than account for my liberal use of shop resources. And since Gobber doesn't take any inventory of the wood around here, considering we live right next to an overgrown forest, I don't think he'll realize I didn't actually use any of it." I looked over the specifics a few more times before accepting that it would fool anyone that wasn't me and laid it back down on my workbench. "Hopefully it'll be enough of a cover story if he or my father asks." Satisfied with my work, I was about to slip off of my stool and move onto the final project we had to work on when I felt Astrid clamp down on me a little.

"Yes, we can get to that in a moment. But before we do, what... What is this?" She pulled up her left hand and pointed at the cannon plans on my workbench. "And how did you figure out how to build it? How do you ever figure out how to make these things?" Her curiosity took me a bit by surprise. I never really had a chance to talk about something I'd built, let alone to someone who was actually interested in what I had to say. We might have been a bit pressed for time, but it was an opportunity my mind wouldn't pass up.

"Well, I guess I should do some explaining, all things considered. Not to mention it might not be a bad idea to tell you just in case my father ever asks you about it. Still, I should try to stay brief, so I won't go into too much detail." I grabbed a spare candle from a supply box next to my workbench, lit it, and held it over the plans. "This is a cannon. I got the idea from an old book I picked up from Johann, along with..." I interrupted myself to slide open a drawer under the bench, removing from it a jar filled with a grainy black substance. "This. It's called black powder, and it's some really volatile stuff. It explodes immediately upon contact with fire, making it a useful tool, or in this case, a useful weapon." I gently returned the jar to its drawer and closed it, then moving my attention back to the plans in front of us. "This long iron tube is the cannon. To fire it, you fill the bore with powder, add in some paper wadding to seal the explosive and then push an iron ball down on top of it all. Once it's loaded and aimed, lighting the fuse at the back will ignite the powder and launch the ball, which will in turn mangle anything in its way. As far as my father's concerned, I

built this cannon piece by piece, hauled the pieces off to the forest when no one was looking and got to testing." Against my cheek I could feel Astrid's pulling into a smile before she spoke.

"That's both incredibly impressive and terrifying, and considering your luck I'm glad you never actually built it. But with that in mind, what if Stoick wants to see it?"

"First, I'm taking both of those as compliments. Secondly, do you have to ask? I tell him I overdid it with the gunpowder and blew up the cannon. I can't show it to him if it's a smoldering pile of bits, now can I?" I felt Astrid's smile grow wider while I finished my explanation.

"Always the clever one, aren't you? Even if they had the time to go looking, there'd be nothing to find."

"That's the basic idea, yeah. But lets hope I never have to use it." I blew out the candle I'd been holding and placed it back in its box with the others as Astrid's arms slowly slid from around me. "Now, as much as I like talking about things no one else understands," I began, pausing for a moment to hop off of my stool, "we do have work to do." Astrid nodded to me before walking herself over to and sliding open the loft's trapdoor, pulling herself up into its inky blackness. I waited below the hole in the ceiling she'd disappeared into with outstretched arms, ready to catch the bucket of scales and tunic still hiding in the forgotten storage area.

"Ugh! What-" I could hear Astrid sliding something very slowly across the wooden-plank floor of the loft. She only moved it a few times before stopping and cursing to herself. "Brilliant, Astrid. Come up here with no light and then get stuck." More shuffling came from the darkness, followed by a defeated-sounding sigh. "Hey, Hiccup? Can you grab a candle and bring me some light up here?" I could hear her tugging against the object once again as it scraped across the old planks. "I forgot I'd need one and my armor is caught-" she gave the object another firm tug, "on- ah!" The shuffling and sliding she was doing in the loft stopped for a moment, replaced by the sound of something small rolling towards the trapdoor.

"Astrid, are you alright-Ow!" A small lump of metal had dropped from the darkness above and struck the bridge of my nose before bouncing to the floor. I began massaging where I'd been hit while I looked around for whatever had fallen on me.

"Nice catch." I looked up to see Astrid smirking down at me with a tunic-filled bucket in her hand. I grabbed it from her and brought it over to my workbench, placing it on the ground as she returned from the loft. She closed the trapdoor and then bent down to the ground, eventually picking up a small metal item from the floor of the shop. "I was trying to find our things when my armor got caught on whatever junk Gobber has stored up there. Just as I managed to pull myself free, this hit me on the head." She reached out and dropped into my outstretched hand the offender: a small, toothed wheel affixed to a ring. "What is it?"

"Well, this part's gear, but considering the ring it's attached to, I'd guess it's a piece of jewelry. What it's doing in Gobber's shop, though, I have no idea. He never struck me as a 'jewelry' kind of guy." I brought it over to one of the candles on my workbench for

some better lighting when I noticed a bright red glint coming from the face of the gear. Holding it up to the flame revealed several tiny, shimmering rubies that had been set in the shape of the head of a rose. Around the rose was a bit of text that I recognized, but couldn't quite read.

"It's beautiful." Astrid was right next to me, inspecting the object closely. "What does it say? Do you know?" I gave it a closer look, trying to make out the characters in the flickering candle light.

"Lib... Scien. I can't read all of it because of this dirt caked on the front." I ran my thumbnail over the dried mud a few times, to no avail. "I'll have to clean it later. As for what it says, the text is Latin, that much I do know. Beyond that I couldn't tell you what it means." I continued admiring the bright red rubies when a distant, nearly inaudible whooshing of air froze the blood in my veins.

"Please tell me I'm just hearing things." I turned my head to Astrid while I slipped the ring into the drawer currently housing my jar of black powder.

"You're not just hearing things." Another, much louder whooshing sound came from just above the forge, coupled with the distant roar of a Nightmare.

"So, what did you want me to do?" Astrid was staring at me, wide-eyed, waiting for instruction. It was the most peculiar feeling to have the prodigy dragon hunter asking me for a plan, but considering her newly-found distaste for harming the creatures, I couldn't blame her for her fears.

"Just like I told you before. Gather the others for fire duty, ignore what Toothless does and keep the villagers away from the storehouse and the fields. Lie if you have to. And if anyone in the village asks where I am, tell them you saw me run into the forest."

"Okay. And you'd better be careful up there, Hiccup. I mean it." I gave her a quick nod and a smile, but before I could run out she pulled me in for another kiss, which I gladly accepted. My fear and nervousness vanished in that moment, and only fragments of them remained when we pulled apart. We stood there for a second more, basking in the afterglow of the moment before quickly calming down and shooting out of the forge. She made for the town square to regroup with the others as I made my way to the forest alone.

* * *

><p>"Toothless!" I called the dragon's name out between breaths as I threw myself down the main entrance to the cove. He had already gathered our gear from our cubby and laid it out next to the lake as he waited for me arrive. I nearly tripped as I hurried up to him, stopping only long enough to catch a bit of my breath before pulling my harness on. Toothless stood motionless as I began equipping him as quickly as I could, all the while trying my best to ignore my heart slamming against my ribs and aching lungs. I finished affixing the saddle and the tailfin controller just as a distant, angry roar came from near the village, signifying the official start to the dragon attack. Wasting no more time I mounted the saddle, hooked myself in

place and opened Toothless' tailfin. We exploded into the air and began heading toward the village as quickly as we could.<p>

"_So, Hiccup..." _Toothless' voice broke me away from the situation for a moment with how calm he sounded. "_About the plan. I think we should take out the catapults before we go after the other targets."_ I looked down at him in confusion.

"Why the catapults? I thought we only needed to let the dragons get away with the food they're coming for. Besides that, we use those for more than just dragon raids."

"_I know that, Hiccup. I've watched your village for years. But these dragons... There's more of them coming than your village has ever faced. And on top of that, they're not themselves. Attacking them only makes them worse. Something your village has never noticed." _His left eye stared back at me, waiting for some sort of response. I didn't see the point, but it seemed important to him.

"Well, If you think it's a good idea, I guess we can do it. But only the ones that aren't manned. I don't want to hurt any of the villagers." Toothless nodded as his eye swiveled back forward.

"_I'll make sure of it. Now, after we take out the catapults, the next thing we're doing is ripping open that building filled with food. After that we're going to scatter the animals in the fields and then head to the docks to destroy another building filled with fish. Am I forgetting anything?"_

"Nope, just those three places: the storehouse, the fields and the smokehouse. We also need to defend the others, but only if they're in immediate danger. The village will know something is wrong if they see you attacking another dragon." I'd barely finished speaking when a pillar of Nadder fire erupted behind us, missing me on the right by inches. In retaliation, Toothless closed his wings and flipped us backwards mid-flight, shooting the Nadder square in the face before it had a chance to attack a second time. The dragon was blasted out of the sky and into the ocean while Toothless finished his backflip and reopened his wings. I watched the entire scene unfold with more than a bit of impressed admiration, but at the same time I couldn't help but feel bad about what he'd done to the Nadder. "Ouch. I mean, I know it attacked us, but... It's not dead, is it? And can Nadders swim?"

"_If they couldn't swim, they wouldn't be one of the most common dragons in the area. We do live on islands in the middle of the ocean, after all. Besides, I didn't hit him that hard. He'll live."_

"But did you have to shoot him in the face? He'll remember that the next time they come around."

"_He won't, actually."_ Toothless stared back at me for a moment before turning his attention to the dragons attacking the village. "_None of them will. Right now, they really are just mindless killing machines. It's what the Queen does to them when she sends them out. Her scent and her call turns them into these monsters."_ I scanned my eyes across the entire scene, watching them and listening carefully to their battle cries. They moved swiftly, as they always had, but

the grace I'd learned to see in the dragons had otherwise vanished. Their attacks came without thought, and their behavior became even more violent with each blow.

"They don't have any idea what they're doing. And... Are those ones coming after us?" I pointed out a dozen or so Gronckles and Nadders flying after us as best they could.

"_Not a clue in the world, and yes, they are. They probably saw me attacking their friend."_ Rather than sticking around to fight them, Toothless and I shot up into the clouds as we made our way to the trebuchet-dotted coastline. "_This is why we need to get rid of those catapults your Vikings built. Every blow makes them angrier, and that anger spreads between them. The last thing this village needs is a massive hoard of mindless dragons slowly working themselves even further into a blind rage."_ We dipped below the clouds for a moment to make sure we were alone again before descending towards our first targets. "_Are you ready for this, Hiccup? It is your village, after all._"

"As ready as I'll ever be. But thanks for the concern." Toothless purred in response as a few licks of gas escaped from his nostrils. He continued readying himself for the barrage he'd be unleashing on the catapults as the two of us banked back around to the coastline. "Wait for it, Toothless. Not yet. Not yet..." We pulled ever closer to the massive trebuchets until we were nearly close enough to touch them. "Now!" A blue streak hit the air, pulling on the night sky and blowing one of the catapults apart. Another blast followed, doing much the same to the next one in line. Blast after blast hit the next successive catapult until all but two had been demolished. Those remaining had already been armed and manned, and true to his word, Toothless kept from firing on them.

"_Alright, that's good enough. It'll be a lot harder for them to fire into the swarm with only two of those things."_ We shot back up toward the clouds, avoiding a few more angry dragons and headed for the storehouse. "_Are you sure you're alright, Hiccup?"_ His eyes swiveled back and locked on to mine. "_You're pale. I know it's not easy, but like you said, they won't leave until they have what they've come for."_ I swallowed hard and nodded to him, barely able to move much less speak. It was for the best, but I was still attacking my own home. I calmed down a little as Toothless began his second descent near the heart of the village.

"I'm... I'll be alright. We've got work to do right now." Focusing on the task at hand I pushed those thoughts away and dove us toward the storehouse. "Just like before, Toothless. Don't shoot until we're right on top of the building. We're going to want to make a big hole, so keep that in mind. The more dragons that can get in there, the better." We dove close enough to the village to hear the voices of panicked Vikings, skimming so low I could almost touch the village rooftops as we bore down on our target. "Do it." Another flash of light cut through the darkness and blew the storehouse's roof completely open. The blast had barely finished before a swarm of scales crowded into it, pulling and tearing at whatever edible items they could reach. Once more I pushed my guilt to the back of my mind as we made for the fields, only to find them already completely scorched and devoid of animals.

"_It looks like they've already beat us to the punch on this one."_

As we soared overhead I pulled a spyglass from my vest and took a closer look. There were no living sheep or cows, no dragons and no blood to be found. A few nets had been strewn about as well as some damaged weaponry, and in the distance I could see a group of Vikings tending to a few wounded by the cover of a burning building.

"Seems that way." As we soared back toward Berk I took a moment to look for the others. It didn't take me very long to find them putting out a group of burning buildings on the other side of the village from the storehouse. They were accompanied by Snotlout's father, who was pulling aside debris and helping a few of the older villagers out of the remnants when a Nightmare landed behind them, catching them off guard. "Toothless, forget the docks. Over there, now!" I quickly put away my spyglass as we shot toward the large dragon. Toothless readied another blast and fired on our approach, knocking the Nightmare in the back of its skull and sending it face first into the ground. We pulled back up and flipped around, readying another attack on the dragon when its bleeding head shot upright and looked to the sky. Toothless opened his wings and slowed to a flutter right as the Nightmare took to the sky, paying no mind to us as it soared by. I could hear Toothless let out a sigh of relief as the Nightmare and the rest of the dragons regrouped and began receding from Berk.

"_I guess they're finally done. And by the looks of things, most of the village is still intact."_ I took a quick glance around as Toothless and I began pulling ourselves into the sky again. Other than a few burning buildings and the damage caused by the two of us, the village was left largely unharmed.

"Yeah, but that doesn't exactly tell us how much food we're going to have to make up for. It's a good thing the others are doing so well with their dragons, because we're definitely going to need their help if we plan on replacing everything we've lost." Toothless' agreement vibrated through my bones as we made our way back to the cove. I'd have to drop him off and hurry back home as quickly as I could, and even then I'd need an excuse to explain my absence. "We've got to hurry a little faster, bud. If I know my father, he's probably worried and wondering where I am right now, and the explanation I told Astrid to give isn't going to be buying us much time." Toothless concurred with me again as we kicked our speed up as high as the air would let us. The wind whistled loudly in my ears as we ripped across sky, eventually dying down as Toothless and I came in for a landing at the cove. The moment we touched down, I hopped from Toothless' back, gave him a quick scratch behind the ear and ran for the village.

* * *

><p>"HICCUP!" The voices of my father as well as several villagers echoed through the trees while I hurried toward home. Small flickers of light coming from torches in the distance told me there were at least a dozen people searching for me, maybe more. I watched them carefully as we approached each other, keeping to the darkness and trying to avoid making noise as I closed in on them. All I needed was to get out of the forest and get behind them so I could direct their attention away from Raven's Point and the cove. After I did that I'd have to bluff my way through an explanation that involved my cannon and just hope they accepted it.<p>

"Hiccup?" Another voice called out to me as I left the forest and

reentered Berk. Gobber, who had apparently joined the search party later than the others, was about to enter the woods right where I had left it. I tried to hide, but he had already locked eyes on me before I had a chance to react to him. "HE'S OVER 'ERE! Doesn' look like he's in bad shape, either." My legs locked in place and my blood froze once again, a sensation I'd grown uncomfortably used to ever since meeting Toothless. To make things worse, I didn't have any time to shake my nervousness before the searching villagers " and my father " reappeared from the woods. All I could do was wipe a cold sweat from my head as the Viking adults surrounded me and began looking me over for injuries. Be it either satisfaction that I wasn't injured or the presence of the village chief, they stopped and moved out of the way when he approached. He stood there for a moment and just stared at me before opening his mouth.

"Hiccup." He eyed me up and down, his worried face slowly changing to the look of suspicion he'd been giving me over the past few days. "Where have you been?" I opened my mouth to speak when Astrid and the others ran up to us. My father shot out his hand and gestured for them to stop, which they listened to without question. "Well? I'm waiting for an answer, Hiccup."

"Well, I uh... I went out to- to the forest. I know you told me not to, but I've, uh, been building someth-

"No you haven't." He was staring daggers at me now, giving me that angry glare I'd only seen on him when he was defending the village. "That Night Fury has never been quite so capable before, Hiccup. It destroyed almost all of our catapults. I wouldn't find that strange if I knew the beast only ever attacks a handful of them before it disappears. But instead, it ruined our defenses against not just the dragons, but attacking tribes. Then it went after the storehouse, something the damned thing has never done. Can you explain that? And can you explain why Spitelout told me that same Night Fury attacked a Nightmare that was ready to gore him, his son and the rest of your friends?" I couldn't make myself say or do anything, but before I would have even have the chance to my father walked up to me and reached out one of his massive hands. I didn't flinch from the strike I was expecting, but it never came. Instead I found his fist clenched tightly around a strap of leather running back to my waist. I nearly passed out when the realization hit me: I hadn't removed my riding gear. "Tell me, Hiccup, does this-" he pulled the strap hard enough to nearly knock me over, "have anything to do with this?" From his other hand came my biggest mistake. A sheet of paper with a Night Fury, dressed in a saddle that was strikingly similar in looks to the harness I had on, was hanging inches from my nose. "And does it have anything to do with the bucket of dragon scales Gobber found in your workshop?"

"Dad, I- It's not- I was only trying to he-" His fist came up and met me in the stomach, knocking the wind out of my lungs and dropping me to my knees. I couldn't stop the pain, and I couldn't stop my father from tying my hands together with the strap of my vest. No one else around him dared even move while he finished binding my hands, not to help him or stop him. Gobber was pale and utterly dumbstruck, and in the distance I could almost swear Astrid wasn't alone in fighting back tears. At least Stoick didn't expect them of anything, or if he did he wasn't letting it on.

"No more games, no more lying. I don't care why you did what you did,

and I don't want to know." He pulled out the drawing again, crumpled it up dropped it to the ground in front of me before grabbing my jaw and forcing me to look at him. "I'll figure out what we're going to do with you after I clean my hammer." The weapon that nearly always kept in a holster on his right hip was now hanging close to my head. In my dazed state I could still tell it wasn't in any need of cleaning, and as the pain subsided the realization of what he meant began to spread through my veins. I was left with nothing but a looming sense of dread and a slow, seething anger, stronger than any I'd ever felt before. "Now Hiccup," Stoick began as he yanked me to my feet, "Where is the Night Fury?"

17. Departure

****A/N: ****Well, that took far, far too long. Luckily, the next chapter has already been started, and I've finally figured out how this story is going to end! We've probably got a good ten chapters or so, but don't hold me on that number._

Anyway, it's currently six am, and I'm not sleeping because I have a doctor's appointment in a couple of hours that I'm worrying about unnecessarily. As such, I figured I'd try and work out the ungodly mess that was this chapter, and suddenly, it's done. It's a bit shorter than the last few chapters have been, but I'll probably be making up for that soon. Something tells me I'll be breaking a personal word count record in the next few updates. And that's not even considering what lies even further down the road._

Anyway, enjoy._

****PS:****_ Have you seen Attack on Titan? Because you should totally go watch and/or read Attack on Titan. It's almost criminal that it took so long for me to discover._

* * *

><p>Daylight had just begun breaking as Stoick and a small group of Vikings dragged me along through Berk's untouched wilderness. The first half an hour of our trek into the woods was painfully silent, save for a few happy cackles coming from the irritating village recluse, Mildew. Behind him were Astrid and the others, who had followed us despite Stoick's demands they stay in Berk. Surprisingly, he didn't say a word to them when he noticed they'd ignored his orders. In fact, he hadn't said much of anything as we made our way to Raven's Point, and the few glances I stole at him revealed a blank, distant look on his face.<p>

"So what exac'ly are we out lookin' for, Stoick?" Gobber interrupted the silence with a question he'd already asked several times before. When no answer came he elected to keep speaking, if only because the quiet of the village Chief seemed to bother him more than the chance he had of running into a dragon. "Even if the boy really did shoot down tha' Night Fury, why would it still be at Raven's Point? I'm tellin' ya, we're not goin' ta find anythin'. An' now you've got a lot a makin' up ta do for what ya... Did to... Yer... Son." Gobber's voice slowly stumbled to a halt as we approached a large hill that had been scarred by a mass of upturned earth and mangled trees. Toothless's impact zone looked a bit different, approaching from the other side, but there was no mistaking what it was. Even my father

seemed startled by the proof that I did something as difficult as shooting down a dragon, but his surprise ended when he found the bolas I'd never come back for.

"So..." He turned to me with that pained, empty stare he'd been wearing since I'd been caught. "Why did you... Why didn't you SAY anything about this? You could've killed it for the village. You could have been a hero!"

"I tried to, dad. You didn't-"

"Enough. Now where is it?" He locked his eyes on me, his frustration steadily growing. "Well? I want to know where you're hiding that dragon." The anger boiling away in my chest began to ice over as the reality of my situation finally sunk in. Desperate to keep the cove a secret, I tried to fight back and keep my anger rolling, all while gathering enough of my composure to speak.

"Look, I'm not hiding a dragon. Yes, I shot down the Night Fury, but he was already gone when I found this place." My father's brow furrowed before he spat out a response at me.

"Liar. I've knocked dozens of dragons out of the sky with bolas just like those over there. Once they're down, they don't just get away, Hiccup. Someone would have had to help the beast, and the only one who could have done that is you."

"Stoick's right," interrupted Spitelout. He was crouched down in front of the discarded bolas, inspecting one of them in his hand. "No dragon could've done this. Take a good look at these ropes." He dusted off the iron ball before holding it up for all to see. The rope attached to it was sliced clean in half, something a struggling dragon would not have been capable of. "These were cut, no doubt about it." He turned his head to me with a dumbfounded stare. "Hiccup, why would you cut it free? And how? It would've torn you apart in a second!" Nearly a dozen people were staring at me once again, their attention shifted from the destruction running away up the hill.

"I cut him free because..." I took a deep breath, hoping in vain that it would calm me and slow my heart down a little. It didn't work. "I cut him free because I couldn't do it. He was tied up, hurt and completely at my mercy. But I couldn't bring myself to kill him. He looked so terrified that it made me feel like... Like I was some kind of monster." The Vikings around me all slowly succumbed to the same bout of utter confusion as I spoke, save for my father. He stared at me, more stony-faced than ever, before clamping his hands around my shoulders and pulling me closer to him.

"This is a war, Hiccup. We're at war, WAR, with these dragons. They can't be trusted, and yet, here you are, my own SON, turning on me, covering for one of them! Like you've forgotten that they've killed HUNDREDS of us over the years! Neighbors, friends and family! I lost my VAL to those monsters!" His face was now inches from mine, and through all of his anger and his pride, I could have sworn his eyes glistened in the moment before he let go.

"Don' ferget, Stoick. Val was still his mother-"

"Gobber." My father interrupted his old friend in monotone, plunging

the group once more into the quiet hum of nature. "We're going to find this dragon. And when we do, we're going to kill it." He stared at me for a moment more before jerking his attention back to Gobber. "Understood?" In a panic, I threw a hand on his massive right arm, hoping to get his attention for once.

"You're missing the point to all of this, Dad. The dragon had a chance to kill me when I cut it loose, but it didn't! It pinned me to that rock over-

"Hiccup!" My father interrupted me once more as he shoved away my hand. "I don't want to hear it anymore. Every time we find something new, your story changes, and I'm tired of it. Now stay quiet and get going down this hill. And that goes for everyone else. I think we'll find that Night Fury somewhere down there." He pointed in the general area of the cove, using the same broken branches that eventually led me to the quiet forest haven. It would still probably take them hours to find it, even with the old trail left behind from Toothless' attempts at flying without a tailfin. But they would still find it, given time.

"Wait! If you'd just listen to me for once in your life, you'd understand-

"THERE IS NOTHING HERE TO UNDERSTAND, HICCUP!" His voice boomed out, angry and mournful, louder than I'd ever heard it. There was no doubt in my mind that Toothless would have heard his yell, maybe even along with few people back in the village.

"But there is! There's a lot to understand, Dad! Please, just listen to me!" Ignoring what I had to say, Stoick made to push me out of his way when a roar sounded out from the cove. Before I could react, he quickly grabbed me and flung me behind him.

"Men, ready your weapons!" Stoick pulled up his hammer once again, stepping between myself and the source of the cry. The other teens, along with Mildew, were pushed up alongside me, behind a wall of armed and capable warriors. With a glance back to my friends, I could see the same kind of fear in their eyes as was in mine. We were waiting for Toothless to approach a fight he very well could lose, if he wasn't careful. I barely had the time to worry about the thought when a blue streak erupted from beyond the tree line in front of us. It knocked the helmet from my father's head before colliding with a sapling and igniting it like a torch. The flames licked at the attention of the Viking guard, giving Toothless a chance to pounce upon the wall of men between us, scattering weaponry and knocking bodies out of his way like children's toys. As the warriors clambered back to their feet from the strike, I made for Toothless with my hands outstretched. He ripped through the bindings with ease before turning and spitting the leather at the now regrouped Vikings. Amid gasps and whispers of 'Night Fury!' the warriors began grouping together behind their shields and aiming their weapons at us. Their terror of and lack of knowledge about Toothless kept them from right out attacking, but they were still poised and ready to do it, if needed.

"STOP! He's not dangerous!" I pleaded, hoping one of them would actually stop and think for a moment about what was happening. "Please! He's only trying to protect me!" Toothless nodded as he growled, an action that went completely unnoticed by anyone other

than my friends. With an unsure look about her I saw Astrid take a small step forward, her expression telling me she was about to try and help explain the situation. I locked eyes with her and frowned, hoping she'd take the hint and back off. I had no intention of taking her down the path I'd chosen, especially since I still needed someone in the arena to lead the remaining lessons.

"So this is how it's going to be, is it?" My father appeared from behind a tree while brushing at a scorch mark on his helmet. He firmly replaced it on his head as he stepped through the Viking wall, apparently unbothered by Toothless' attempts at intimidation. "First my wife, and now my son." He re-holstered his hammer and stared at the two of us with that same dead, defeated expression that I couldn't stand seeing. "I don't want to hear a word out of you, and I don't want to see you here again. Now take your dragon and get off of my island." My father simply stared at us while his warriors slowly began creeping forward. They hadn't been given an order to stop, and the opportunity to kill a Night Fury was apparently hard for them to resist.

"_Hiccup, we need to go, now._" Without thinking I hopped in the saddle and hooked my remaining strap into place. With a single, great flap, we shot high into the morning air. I took the last moment I could to glance back at Astrid, my friends, and my father before the trees became too thick to see them.

* * *

><p>"Are you alright?" It was the first thing Toothless asked me when we landed on one of Berk's outlier islands. I crawled out of the saddle and plopped onto the grass, ignoring his question as I stared off at the rising sun. "_Hiccup?"_ My brain struggled to build any kind of response to a question I couldn't quite comprehend, but with a few concerned nudges from Toothless' snout, I began spilling whatever words were currently on my mind.

"You know, I... Astrid could've...Then... " Another light nudge, this time to my head, partially snapped me back to consciousness. "Sorry, Toothless. I'm just saying... I always knew it could come to this. I just didn't realize it would feel so... Will-sappingly terrible." With all of the effort I could gather, I forced myself into a sitting position while fighting wave after wave of emotion slamming every nerve in my body. "I just hope the others are left alone. And the other dragons. I know Astrid can bluff, so I hope she can bluff her way out of this one." The thought of her and the others being punished for my mistakes was physically revolting. "And my father..."

"_What __**about**__ your father? He bound your hands and was treating you like some kind of animal before I put him in his place. I don't care what his excuse is, no one has the right to treat their own flesh and blood that way._" I could almost feel Toothless's indignation radiating from him as he spoke. He'd always felt a great deal of irritation about the way my father and my village treated me, but this was far beyond that. It was pure malice, not unlike the feeling I'd gathered from the dragons of raids past.

"It's not that simple, Toothless. My father hates dragons. My mother was killed by them, and that woman was his entire life until she died. Now that he thinks I've sided with you, he probably feels like

he's lost everything. I can't really blame him for the way he reacted, even if it did hurt." I felt my stomach where he'd hit me earlier, wincing as my hand made contact with it. It was bruised and painful, but not nearly as badly as I'd imagined it would be.

"_How? How can you not blame him? He treats you like __**dirt**__, Hiccup. How could you possibly be okay with that? Why do you ALWAYS let that village or that... that ogre-man treat you like garbage?!"_ In a single motion I pulled myself to my feet and spun to look at him. There was an anger flowing through me that seemed to come from nowhere, and the only place I wanted to send it was through Toothless.

"Because he's ALL I have left!" I snapped back at him. "My mother died when I was a child and I never had any siblings! I can't lose him!" Toothless stood to meet my eye, his earflaps poised back like he was ready to strike.

"_You have your friends. You have me. That should be all you need, because your family apparently doesn't care much about you. If you could even call him that."_

"I can! Because he is!"

"_Well he sure doesn't act like it!"_

"How would you even know!? You told me yourself you can't remember your own family!" The words left my mouth at the exact moment I tried holding them back. Almost immediately, the heated air between us was replaced once more with the cold winter breeze Berk was known for. We stared at each other, both buffeted by the cold, before sighing in tandem. My shoulders slumped and his earflaps returned to normal as he plopped his backend on the frozen grass.

"_Hiccup... I'm -"_

"No. Don't, Toothless. I should be the one apologizing. I never should have brought that up." My anger had completely vanished, replaced again by a familiar feeling of crushing anxiety mixed with considerable regret.

"_It's fine, Hiccup. But I am sorry for what I said. It's just... If I were in his position, I'd never turn on my offspring. And I can't imagine anything making me change my mind."_ He huffed through his nostrils, hitting me in the face with warm, slightly rotten-smelling air. "_He doesn't know what it's like to survive in the world as a child. I do... And I'd never wish that on anyone."_

"Well, I guess that makes you stronger than my father, in a way." I sighed again, slumping down onto the ground with my arms resting on my knees. "But I wouldn't say he turned on me. He just doesn't think sometimes. In the end, he's done more to hurt himself than I ever will. He regretted even bringing me into that forest from the start; I could tell from the look on his face. But he was too caught up in his own emotions and too stubborn to live down his own orders, so he went through with it." I leaned back again, falling to the grass with a thump. "Once this is all over, and we're living on Berk again... He'll start making it up to me. And I don't think he'll ever be satisfied with the job he does of it, knowing him. All I have to do first is kill the queen." The thought made me chuckle a little. Kill

the dragon queen? What was I thinking?

"That seems like a bit much to prove yourself, don't you think?"_ Toothless stalked over to me, laying down and extending a wing for cover.

"Yeah, but it's not like I have a choice at this point. I said I'd do it, so I'll do it. No matter the cost. It's better than living like this." My eyes finally began drifting shut as the darkness under Toothless's wing enveloped me. "But first... Let's just get some sleep. Assuming we even can."

* * *

><p>Nightfall arrived after several hours of tossing and turning. I'd only managed a few moments of sleep here and there, but my tiredness was easily masked by the slurry of emotions still fluttering around in my chest. I ignored it all as best I could as I climbed on to Toothless. I latched my remaining strap into place, but instead of him taking off, he swiveled an eye back to me.<p>

"_So, what are we doing? With all of our attempts at sleeping in the cold, we never really discussed a plan of any sort."_ His right eye kept a bead on me while my brain grinded through the fog it was in as I looked for a path to take.

"Well, the most obvious place to go first is the cove. Then we have to stop at the forge so I can pick up my tunic and your new saddle. After that... I have no idea. The only thing we really can do is hop from island to island in hopes we might find some supplies. If we're lucky and I find the right tools, I should be able to finish my tunic."

"_Why not steal the tools you need from Gobber?"_

"Yeah, I thought of that. I haven't ruled it out, either. I just want to avoid spending too much time back in town, because they'll probably be on the lookout for us. With that in mind, I don't think we'll be getting that wire rope any time soon. So that means the new saddle's going to have a pretty steep weakness if the rope is shredded or burnt." As I finished my sentence, Toothless nodded and launched us into the air.

"_We'll just have to be careful, that's all. But you still haven't really answered my question. After we finish those things, where will we go? What will we do?"_ Toothless began slowing himself as the cove appeared from the thicket below. I thought about his question as we descended, but I couldn't think of a decent answer. My thoughts were too clouded to even remember the idea I'd originally had for the raid, let alone any kind of exit strategy from Berk.

"Well, I was thinking we could leave the dragon nest's area of influence and see if we can find any other dragons that might want to help us. It's a long shot, but it's the best we have to go on. I just hope Astrid can keep training the others. They'd be a really big help, assuming we can keep the Queen from controlling their dragons." We came to a quiet landing in the cove, touching down in the complete darkness below one of its many towering trees. Even though they hadn't stumbled upon our safe haven, it was best to avoid even moonlight, on the off chance someone was watching.

"_That might work, but it won't be easy to find them. Word of the Queen goes as far south as south can go, and you won't likely find many dragons who would put their lives down to - stop."_ I felt a gust of wind as Toothless's wing shot out in front of me. "_I'm pretty damn certain someone really is here. But where's the smell...?"_ The sound of air sucking through Toothless's nostrils came from just behind me, only to stop as readily as it came. In its place I found a light chuckle. "_I think I'm going to sit right here. You two lovers are probably going to need some alone time before we leave."_ Toothless's wing left my vision, only to come from behind and push me into the moonlight. I steadied myself and walked forward, looking around for Astrid. I noticed the den had been picked though, and our emergency supplies had been laid out on the ground near the fire pit. Next to it were my tunic, Toothless's saddle, the bucket of scales we were using, and a wrapped up bundle of goods that I assumed were a parting gift.

"Hiccup?" Astrid's voice came from the pile of rocks Toothless had first introduced himself to her on, and upon closer inspection I could see a tousled head of golden hair peak up from behind them.

"Astrid?" I made to walk to her, only to be nearly tackled to the ground before even taking a step. Her arms were tight around my chest, constricting me hard enough to squeeze some air from my lungs. Instead of protesting it, though, I merely returned the favor. I didn't know when I'd be able to do it again.

"I gathered your things for you." Her voice was lightly muffled by my fur vest, but it didn't cover the distress in her voice. "I don't know what we're going to do now... It wasn't supposed to happen like this. You've been banished and I don't even know if you'll ever be able to come back after what Stoick did." She loosened her grip a little, but didn't let go of me. She was obviously scared, and it felt oddly out of character for her, and I almost wanted her to stop because of how jarring it was.

"First, Astrid, could you please try to calm down and gather yourself? It's really not like you to act like this, and it's not going to help us." She squeezed me harder for a moment, and then slowly pulled away. I could tell Astrid was still concerned to the point of sickness, but she seemed to actually be trying to fight it now. "That's better. It'll do you no good to get all worked up over this. Anyway, on to my second question. After I left... Did my father do... Anything? Anything bad?" I locked eyes with her and started praying to as many Gods as I could that he didn't touch any of the dragons in the kill ring. I Even considered several Gods I had only heard of in passing from Johann.

"Nothing bad. Several things that are very unlike him, though."

"And... They are?"

"Oh! Sorry. I... I haven't slept at all. Anyway, Stoick canceled dragon training. No one's allowed to go near the dragon ring, no one's allowed to talk about you, and other than Gobber and Spitelout, no one is allowed to go near his house. He hasn't left it since he got back from Raven's Point, meaning those two runners-up in command

effectively run the village now." Astrid sighed and crossed her arms, her eyes aimed down at the ground. "But restrictions or not, somehow I need to get the others back into that arena if we're going to continue our training. We'll probably have to wait on it for a week or two before we give it another shot."

"That's probably a good idea. But I think you should let the dragons know about what's going on. You can't talk to them without me, but they understand you. Knowing you, though, you'll work something out. Hel, you'll probably have already deciphered their language yourself the next time I see you." As I finished my thought, Astrid's eyes shot up to mine.

"When do you think we'll get to see each other again?" The question lingered in the air, leaving us in an uncomfortably long silence.

"I... Don't know, Astrid. But there's nothing we can do about that." I turned to the fire pit and our supplies to gather them, only to find Toothless already doing so. He worked so quietly that I hadn't noticed him, and I suddenly felt a lump of appreciation for his actions. He wanted to give us more time.

"Toothless... I'll miss you, too." The dragon stopped in his actions and looked up at her, nodded, and went back to his business. "And you," Astrid spun her attention back to me, "you had better be as careful as you possibly can. Please. Just... Don't do anything stupid." She walked forward and wrapped her arms around me again, pulling me as close as she could. "If you do accidentally hurt to yourself, I'll never forgive you. Got that?" My response was stopped by a loud whoosh coming from near the den. A roaring fire had appeared in the pit, and lying nearby it was Toothless.

"_Why don't you two come here and get some sleep? I'll make sure we're up before daybreak."_ His tail lightly slapped the ground between him and the fire, and with a glance at Astrid we both made for the warmth he and the pit would provide. We sat down against him, his tail wrapping around us as it had those few nights ago in the dragon nip fields. We sat there in silence, enjoying the crackling of the fire, when Astrid interrupted my tiring eyes with a light hand against my stomach.

"How are you feeling? I never really had a chance to ask you about Stoick knocking the wind out of you. Your father was way out of line when he hit you like that, you know. I almost wanted to yell at him... But it was a good thing I listened to you earlier. Speaking up would've only been worse for us." She rubbed my bruised stomach gingerly, lulling me into a comfortable puddle of warmth. "I really can't forgive him for it, though. At least not now." Silence temporarily retook the night as Astrid pulled her hand from my stomach.

"I'm okay, but thanks for asking. And to be honest... I'm not about to forgive him for it, either. But he's still my father, however bullheaded he can be."

"It's still no excuse." I heard Toothless grumble lightly when Astrid spoke, and I couldn't help but smirk despite the argument we'd had. "See? Toothless agrees."

"I know, we had some words about that." I scratched at his tail a little, coaxing a purr out of him. "Could we talk about something else, though? If it's my last night on Berk for the time being, I'd rather not spend it wallowing in pity over everything that's happened."

"Fair enough. Before we move on though, I have to say, you sure can take a punch. That's something to be proud of." I shot her a blank stare, and all she responded with was a smile. "Don't give me that look! I'm being serious. Now, we can move on to whatever else you want to talk about, but give me a moment to get comfortable before we start, okay?" She spent a moment pulling her hair out of its braid, slid closer to me and, after a bit of fidgeting, found a soft place to rest her head on my vest. "Now, what do you want to talk about?" I looked down at where she was resting her head and smiled. "You know, this kinda reminds me of my seventh birthday. Remember?" Immediately a grin spread across her face. "I do, in fact. Snotlout decided it would be a good idea to show off in front of me by pelting you with rocks, on your birthday of all days. I don't think it ever dawned on him that throwing rocks at a good friend of mine was a terrible way to flirt with me. I was so sick and tired of his antics that I made sure to let him see me leaning against you by the fire in the Meade Hall that night." We laughed a bit about it, but Astrid stopped sooner than I had. "I hope you never thought that I only did that to get back at him." Astrid stopped smiling, but the grin on my face didn't falter.

"The thought had crossed my mind, but I didn't have a chance to really consider it, what with you resting against me. To be honest, I'm surprised I can even talk with you so close, even now." Astrid laughed again and hit me lightly on the arm.

"Oh, quiet, you. You're not a coward like that, and you know it. Anyway, I didn't do that just for revenge. I did it because it was your birthday, and we were friends. And we were cold. And... Well, back then I liked you a lot more than any of the other kids. They were always so obnoxious, and you weren't. And I liked that." The butterflies I'd gotten so accustomed to containing now found themselves plastered against the walls of my stomach.

"Really?" I pushed through the nervous tingling coursing through my veins and placed my left hand on her hip. "Interesting. Are there any other stories you could give me another perspective on?" Her eyes drifted down to the hand I'd placed on her, and all it seemed to do was cause her to grin a little more.

"Probably, mister adventurous. But I'll need you to refresh my memory, so start talking."

* * *

><p>We sat there for hours, slowly drifting in and out of comfortable sleep next to one another. Conversation was interspersed in our waking moments, almost entirely about our childhoods with a bit of dragon taming talk here and there. Most of the stories I could remember clearly, but it was nice to hear them from her perspective. It couldn't last forever, though, and as the sun began lighting up the darkened sky, our reality reared its head. Time was nearly up, and there wasn't much we could do about it but fill it with our thoughts and memories.<p>

"Once I'm done teaching them," Astrid blurted out, "I'll be coming to look for you." Her finger met my lips before I could counter her. "Don't argue. You won't be here to stop me, so once I'm done, I'm gone. I'll set something up with the others so they can stay here and hold down Berk, but I'm not going to be needed for that. Besides, you're going to need my help if you seriously plan on restocking everything we lost with just one dragon." She glanced up to my eyes from the crook of my arm she was nestled in and gave me a stern glare. "And I was serious about you being careful. I know you're better off in the air than you are on two feet, but don't let it go to your head like it sometimes does. Just because you can fly doesn't mean something won't happen to you on the ground." She kept staring at me, but I couldn't tell if she expected a response or was thinking of more to say. "And... Even if this sounds silly, I can't help but remember those stories Gobber and your dad told us when we were younger. Look, if you see a ghost ship, or black fog in the air, or you come across a haunted island... Stay away from those things, alright? It's stupid, I know, but-"

"Astrid." I moved my hand from her hip to her shoulder. "You're right, that is silly. None of those things are real, and you know it. They're just some stories my dad heard years ago from that old wandering couple he and Gobber always talked about. But I promise you, I'll be careful. And I want you to promise me the same thing, alright?" She stared at me for a moment more before nodding and laying her head back down. Her eyes drifted closed for only a moment before Toothless began vibrating us in his usual waking fashion.

"_I hate to interrupt you two, but I've given you as much time as we can afford. The sun will be up in less than half an hour."_ Wish a collective sigh, the three of us rose to meet the day as best we could.

"So." Astrid started. "I guess this is goodbye for now."

"Yeah, I guess so. But I won't be gone forever. I'll be back some day soon, and once that happens, we'll be fighting the queen before you know it." With a smirk, Astrid hit me, and as expected, followed it up with a kiss. This one was different from the others; sweet bliss mixed with all of the negative sensations we'd gathered in the past day and a half. Slowly and eventually, we split apart, leaving us with nothing left to do but mount Toothless and make our way as close to Berk as we could. Upon arriving at the village outskirts, Astrid and I shared another hug and a small kiss, and once she hopped off, Toothless and I left for the world.

End
file.